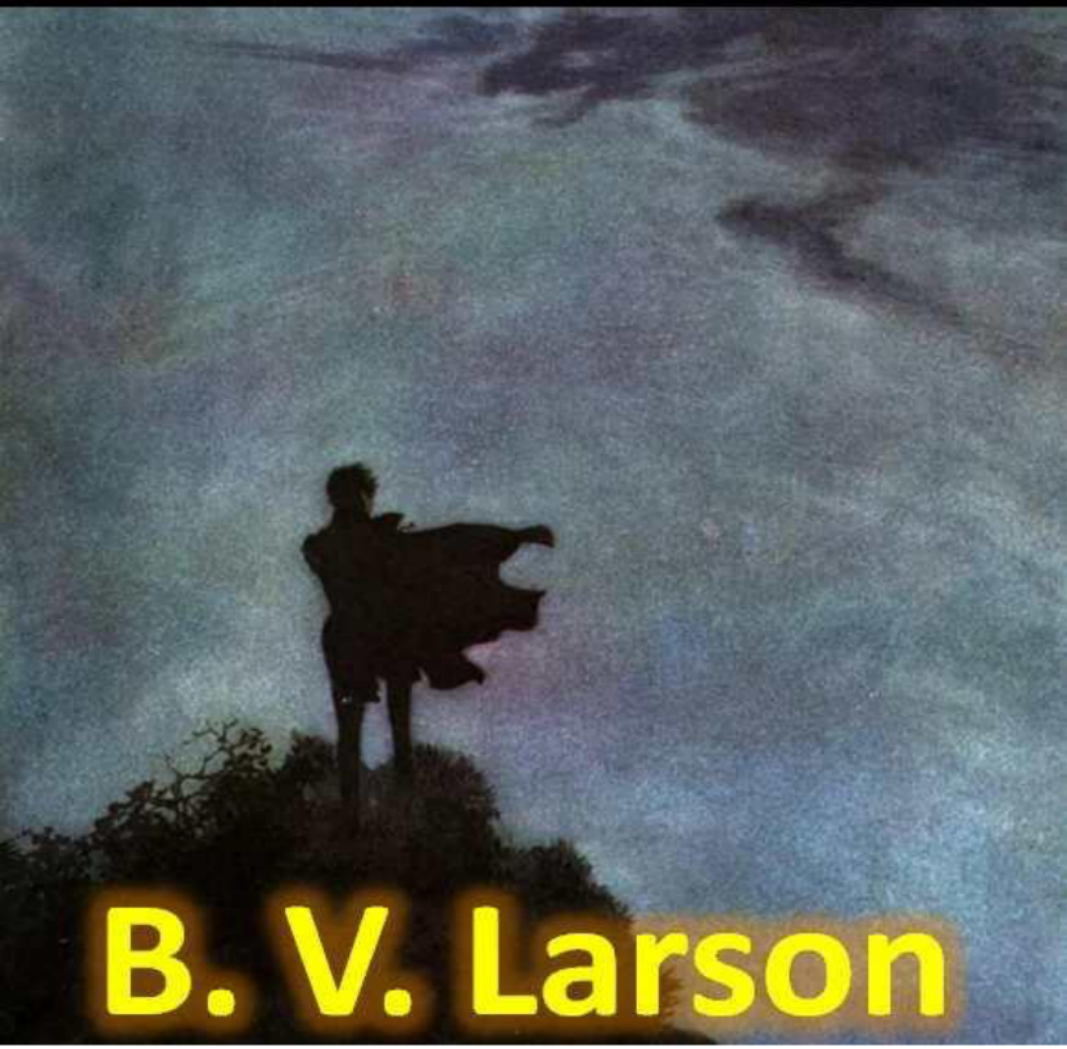
Amber Magic

Book #1 of the Haven Series



B. V. Larson

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B. V. Larson

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Chapter One

Wee Folk

The night was moonless and still. Underneath the dark sky sat a tranquil farmhouse. A soft orange light glowed from the farmhouse windows.

A tiny manling parted the leafy hedge with delicate, thin-boned hands. He watched the farmhouse and barnyard for several minutes, but there was no sign of the River Folk, or their beasts. The creature leered hungrily at his goal: a clay pot set out upon the back porch that brimmed with fresh, creamy milk.

A dark, overly-long tongue snaked out, swept across the creature's lipless mouth and snapped back from whence it had come.

Crouching for the sprint, the tiny thief pushed his cap down squarely upon his head and gripped his walking stick. He burst from the cover of the hedge and dashed across the barnyard. His coattails fluttered as he ran. He shoved his face into the pot and greedily slurped up the feast, pausing only for quick wheezes of breath. Although the clay pot was nearly as big as he was, the milk was gone in a thrice.

Face dripping and belly distended, he cast about for more solid fare. His candle-stick nose wrinkled and twitched in the evening air. He caught an enticing scent-that of fresh fur, fresh life, fresh meat.

Bounding from the porch, he followed the scent to the barn, where cows lowed fearfully at his approach. An old carthorse nickered and kicked once in its stall.

A pile of loose straw obscured a wooden crate. From inside came mewling sounds. Grinning at his good fortune, the manling dug furtively at the straw and poked his face inside. Six gray-furred kittens squirmed deliciously. Their eyes were not yet open. The manling grinned more widely.

Some moments later, a great ruckus brought Aunt Suzenna to the back porch. She noted the absent milk.

The screeching sounds from the barn continued. She called to her husband over her shoulder, “Mama-cat has caught something in the barn!”

The screeching and commotion grew in intensity.

“Here, puss, puss,” Suzenna called, looking with concern toward the dark hulking building.

Suddenly, a tiny figure bounded out into the yard. It wore clothes

like a man but was no bigger than a doll. It took incredible leaps, despite its swollen belly, each stride carrying it a dozen feet or more. Right behind it was Mama-cat, ears flat, eyes blazing.

The chase went around the farmhouse once and then off into the woods.

“Wee Folk!” gasped Suzenna, eyes wide with wonder and fear. Trembling on her feet, she looked in on the newborn kittens in the barn. She counted all six, although she had to scoop up two of them and put them back in their wooden crate. She stepped back into the house and pulled the door shut.

Soon after that, the shutters slammed and the house fell dark. None inside dared speak above a whisper for the rest of the night.

Chapter Two

Troubled Waters

The final reddening rays of sunlight streamed down from the heavens to touch mountains, sea, leafy treetops and thatched roofs. Near the western border of the River Haven, at the foot of the Black Mountains, the dying light illuminated a rain cloud. Silvery-gray droplets fell from the cloud's belly and shimmered into arcs of crimson, orange, amber, green, blue and violet. Together, the arcs formed a brilliant rainbow. Everyone in the Haven who saw it knew that somewhere, at the impossible foot of the rainbow, danced a ring of the elusive Faerie.

To the east of the rainbow lay the Berrywine River. There the sunlight fell upon the backs of Brand and his older brother Jak. The warmth of the sun was slight, but it felt good on Brand's bare head and helped keep him from shivering beneath his cloak of gray, homespun wool. Brand glanced to the west and shivered at the sight of the rainbow, its presence chilled him anew. He hunched over his pole and worked harder.

He and Jak were speaking little now, saving their energies for punting the loaded skiff quickly to safety before the light failed completely. The short mast at the center of the skiff was unadorned by a sail as the wind was blowing upriver and into their faces. They had only the current and the power of their limbs to move them down the river.

Their hardwood poles glinted wetly. A dragonfly landed on the tip of Brand's pole, making him smile and pause briefly before it flittered away with a shimmering movement of its translucent wings.

They rounded the last of the Thorn Rocks and entered the deep, slow-moving eddies on the far side. Brand was forced to shove his pole down to where his hands touched the inky river in order to reach the bottom. Soon, they were able to do little more than drift between the spots where they knew the bottom was in range of their long poles.

So busy were the two young men with their task that at first Brand ignored the movement of a shadow in the white-barked birch trees on the west side of the river. The second time, however, the water seemed disturbed, and he looked up. What he saw amongst the trees left his mouth open wide, gaping.

The shadowy figure of a man on horseback stood there-at least it was man-shaped-on the shore, but still hidden somewhat by the long

afternoon shadows of the trees. His surprise was not in the sight so much, although it was strange to see a man in the River Haven all clad in black and staring silently, but rather in the feeling that overcame him. Later, he could only describe it as dread-the feeling of a cornered rabbit that turns to face the fox's teeth. Instinctively, he hunkered down, losing his grip momentarily on his pole as it slipped from his fear-numbed fingers.

Then he saw a silvery glint of something in the shadow's hands. Something long and bright.

“You're losing your pole!” shouted Jak, turning back to see what the matter was.

Sure enough, it had slipped completely from his hands and was sinking fast. Brand made a grab for it, caught it, and nearly fell in. After a precarious moment, he regained his feet, years of boating experience coming in to save him. He turned back to the shore, ignoring Jak's perplexed frown.

“What's gotten into…” began Jak, but he halted, following Brand's wide-eyed stare.

They looked together at the trees along the western shore. There was nothing there.

“What was it?” hissed Jak, stowing his pole and unlashing the crossbow. “Was it a merling?”

Brand shook his head. “It's gone.”

“That's the edge of the Deepwood and the Deepwood is full of merling dens. It probably slipped into the water. You get the boathook. If I see its froggy eyes pop up, I'll chance a shot at it,” said Jak, hurriedly putting his foot into the stirrup of his crossbow and cocking it.

“No, no merling…” said Brand. “It was a man-maybe.” He quickly described what he had seen, leaving out only his feeling of cold dread.

Jak stared at him for a long moment, and Brand feared that even his brother was not going to believe him. It did seem very odd, even to him. But finally, Jak nodded, placing a bolt into the slot of the crossbow.

“It's been a strange autumn,” was all that he said.

They watched the water and the trees for a time, but nothing else happened.

“We must get our offering to the village before dark,” said Jak when it seemed clear that the shadowy figure would not return. “The Harvest Moon is almost full tonight.”

Brand quietly agreed.

They spent the rest of the trip tensely watching the western shore. The river moved below them, carrying the skiff rapidly downstream in the narrow portions, barely creeping or swirling backwards in the

wide slow parts. They knew every mile of the river, every deep, backwashing eddy and pole-catching snag. More importantly, since the river changed somewhat with the seasons and the years, they knew how to tell a new snag just by the way the current wavered as the water passed over it. Like all the folk that lived in the River Haven, they felt most at home when near running water, or preferably on running water.

Feeling the chill breath of the night that lay ahead, Brand half wished he had worn his newest thigh-high boots, dreading the intrusion of river water and squishy delta mud when they had to wrestle the cargo up to the docks. The trouble was that his older boots were no longer thigh-high as he had grown so greatly this past year. Somehow, he had not yet been able to bring himself to wear his new boots on the river, wanting both to keep them clean and new, and at the same time wanting to savor the comfortable feel of the old ones.

Autumn had come early this year, very early. It seemed that winter was already on its way, although summer had only just ended. The Black Mountains to the east and the higher peaks of Snowdonia to the north were already dusted with caps of snow. Hail had damaged much of the crops, ending hopes of a good harvest. Worse still, there had been many signs that things were not right in the River Haven. Rainbows occurred almost daily, earning frowns and concerned looks cast over hunched shoulders. Reports of wolves, merlings and worse things had become commonplace. All over the Haven, from the High Marshes to the Glasswater Lake delta, came word of things appearing from the forests and mountains, and even out of the Berrywine River itself. Fisherman and hunters made sure they were home by dark, and the shepherds hurried their flocks into their pens early each evening. Up on the Isle of Harling, as far up the river as folk from the Haven ever ventured, a hill giant was supposed to have wrecked a farm with his two great fists. Although many scoffed, everyone was glancing back at the trail behind.

Brand looked down at the crossbow and the boathook that lay atop the skiff's netted cargo of broadleaf melons and berrywine casks. He wondered if a single steel-tipped bolt could stop a hill giant. When he looked up, he noticed that his brother Jak was eyeing him sidelong. Jak was three years older, but Brand was taller. They didn't bear much family resemblance, Jak being blond and brown-eyed, while Brand was dark-haired with eyes like clear blue water. Both, however, had well-muscled shoulders from long years of battling the river's currents and eddies. Jak gave Brand a hard look. Brand blinked for a moment, reminded of first his father and then his mother, both dead these last seven years. In years past, they had all traveled for the offering to Riverton together as a family.

Jak huffed at him then and he was reminded that he wasn't punting, nor was he watching for trouble as was his assigned task. Worse, they were close to the Talon Rapids, where the going became the toughest. Blushing, he put his back into it and turned to watch the shores again. Jak returned to his work in the prow, shaking his head.

Both heaved a sigh of relief when they rounded the final bend into the wide slow section of the river that surrounded Stone Island. In the blue-white twilight, Stone Island was an impressive sight. On three sides the island rose up on cliffs of hard granite, twenty to fifty feet high in most places. Atop this gray wall perched a hilly land of forests and glens. The fourth side, the eastern side, dipped down to the water and cradled a lagoon and the village of Riverton. Chosen long ago as a good site for a community as it was well-protected from storms and floods, Riverton had been the prosperous center of the Haven for as long as anyone could remember.

Chapter Three

Riverton

Darkness fell swiftly as they drifted toward the island. The first anchored buoy clanged its bell in greeting and they exchanged smiles. Their faces were now illuminated only by the light of the lantern that swung from the lamppost on the mast. They let the current take them now, lifting their poles from the water and saving their energies for the final push to the village docks at Riverton. Both were tired, a bit shivery, and glad the journey was almost at an end. It seemed to Brand that their home island was further away from Riverton this autumn than ever before.

Tonight, Stone Island was a towering shadow of blackness. Only the twinkling lights from the outlying houses that were sprinkled along the cliffs and the warm diffuse glow that came from Riverton relieved the darkness. It wasn't long before the skiff slipped into the lagoon and nudged up against the docks. Brand and Jak were lucky; there was plenty of space at the high public docks. There was no need to jump down into the cold squelching mud of the river to pull the skiff up to shore. A lone cart waited for them at the docks. A brown carthorse stood, tail flipping. The cart's driver climbed down from the board and held aloft a heavy brass lantern in greeting.

"Hey there, Corbin!" shouted Brand to the driver. "Give us a hand, man!"

With heavy steps that suggested bulk, the man approached. Brand noted that the man had the hood of his cloak pulled up and that the lantern failed to penetrate the gloom within. He frowned. Was this truly Corbin? Or was it someone good at imitating his slow, stumping gait? Thoughts of the shadowy horseman back on the river sprang to mind.

"What's wrong with you, Brand?" asked Jak, a bit short-tempered after the difficult trip. "Take this cask, will you?"

Brand clambered up onto the dock and took the proffered cask. He set it down on the creaking boards while still eyeing the approaching figure. Then he shook his head, chiding himself. Of course it was Corbin. No shadow man could walk like that.

Corbin stepped closer and threw back the hood of his cloak. "It's a cold one tonight, isn't it? It took you gentlemen quite some time to get here. Couldn't use the sails?" he asked. His wide face split with a smile that showed his strong white teeth. "Good to see you, in any case." He

was the same age as Brand, both of them being about twenty, but looked older with his heavy reddish beard and broad shoulders. Corbin was as surprisingly wide as Brand was tall. As was often the case with young hard-working men, there was no fat on either of them.

Although he felt a bit silly, Brand grabbed Corbin's free hand and shook it. He couldn't help but feel relieved. “Good to see you too, my cousin.”

Jak, standing in the skiff, was looking up at them with his fists on his hips. He said nothing, but Brand could tell what he was thinking: You've been acting jumpy all day, ever since… There was no need to finish the thought.

With renewed energy, Brand jumped back into the skiff and began handing up the cargo with Jak. Corbin stacked the casks two at a time and piled the melons beside them with easy, deliberate movements.

Soon they were finished with the first step, and after securing the skiff for the night they carried the cargo to the cart and loaded it. Lastly, they tossed up their rucksacks with their fresh clothes and gear. “I wish that Tator would come out on the dock,” said Jak. “Although I can't say that I blame him for being skittish about the water.”

The shaggy brown pony tossed his head, perhaps recognizing his name. Corbin patted him as he loaded two more broadleaf melons. “Tator knows what's best for him,” he said gently. “And falling into the lagoon ain't it.”

While Jak climbed up onto the board next to the driver's seat and Brand tried to get comfortable perched on the wine casks, Corbin fed Tator an apple from his pocket. Then he heaved himself into the driver's seat and they set off. The horse pulled the cart slowly but gamely up the hill toward Riverton.

The first houses they passed were mounted on spindly-looking stilts. Neither the stilts nor the rickety houses themselves appeared to be in the best of repair. Most of these belonged to the less reputable clans among the Riverton folk, which meant the Hoots, who were the most numerous, as well as the Silures and the Fobs. They inhabited the dock region primarily because no one else wanted to live on stilts that might not hold in the yearly floods, which made the land cheap. It was even cheaper if one simply squatted on the land and built a shack there, which was what many of them did. Brand always disliked the first part of the road up from the docks as it wound through this section of town. It was no fun passing beneath the sour eyes of the Hoots and the Silures who had made a family tradition of sitting out on the raised porches of their shacks in the evenings. There they

would sit, some rocking, most smoking long-stemmed clay pipes, all with a large corked jug of fruit wine at their feet.

Years ago, when Jak and Brand had been children and their parents had still lived, the Silures had tried to take Rabing Isle from them with an ancient writ of inheritance. The writ, supposedly discovered among the effects of old man Tad Silure, had turned out to be a forgery. The entire Silure clan, and the Hoots, who counted the Silures as close kinsfolk due to excessive intermarriage between the two clans, had never forgotten the loss of Rabing Isle, which they still regarded as rightfully theirs. Brand looked at the others on the driver's board, and noted that they had a determined cast to their postures. They leaned forward, hunching over without glancing from side to side. He could only imagine the grim look of distaste on their faces. No one in the Rabing clan would give a Silure or a Hoot the time of day. Only the Fobs were on good terms with them, as they disliked both the others.

“I can only imagine the offering that this lot has come up with for the Feast,” muttered Jak back over his shoulder to Brand. “Probably a barrel of last month's salmon garnished with old man Tad Silure's shoelaces.”

Corbin and Brand said nothing in return, but they did exchange a glance. Jak had never forgiven the Silures or the Hoots, and persisted in the claim that they had had a hand in the queer boating accident that had left his parents missing and presumably eaten by merlings.

Slightly higher up the hill they passed the tannery and the slaughterhouse. Brand turned a wistful eye to the rambling old house that stood near the tannery. A single candle burned in an upstairs window. Brand wondered if it was Telyn's room.

Jak nudged Corbin, and it was a moment before Brand noticed that they were both eyeing him and grinning. “You sure are sweet on that Fob girl, aren't you Brand?” chuckled Jak.

Corbin laughed and slapped the reins lightly on Tator's back, as the horse had begun to slow, having sensed their distraction. Brand felt his cheeks flush and grimaced at the melons.

“Scraper, isn't that what they call her?” asked Jak.

Brand frowned at him. “Her name's Telyn.”

Jak nodded, saying nothing more. Corbin began humming a little tavern song about the lord who loved the pig farmer's daughter. Brand sighed, and they both grinned at him.

“I think she's a fine girl, Brand,” said Jak quietly.

Corbin cleared his throat; a mannerism that Brand knew was his mild form of apology. Nothing more was said of it, but Brand continued to watch the lonely candle in the window until they had left it beyond a bend in the road.

After a time the rutted road left the docks and the shacks behind and Riverton proper began. Here the houses were larger and more pleasantly lit up. Sounds of merry-making came from beneath several of the thatched roofs. Smoke curled into the night sky and the scent of burning pine and frying trout filled the streets. Brand and Jak both found their mouths watering. It had been many hours since lunch.

Corbin, never one to travel far between meals himself, sensed their mood. “The Harvest Moon won't come for two nights. We needn't take the offering all the way to the faerie mound tonight. Let's go by Froghollow and see if my mother has some of her stew and cornbread left over.”

Brand perked up visibly. His eyes pleaded with Jak.

“Well,” said Jak after a moment of thoughtful chin rubbing. “If you think we can get to the common by first light tomorrow…”

“There isn't a doubt of it!” said Brand.

Jak nodded. “I would certainly hate to miss out on any of Aunt Suzenna's corn muffins.”

“Nor her stew, either,” added Brand, delighted. At his age, skipping a meal, especially supper, seemed an almost criminal act. And for a fact, there was no better cook in the clan than Aunt Suzenna. Even old Gram Rabing's legendary cooking had been surpassed years ago.

“Good then, it's decided,” Corbin said. He made a comfortable readjustment of his bulk on the sagging driver's board. “Quite possibly, I could do with a bite myself.”

Jak laughed out loud at this, poking Corbin in his thick ribs. “Thin as a rail you are, boy. Famished!”

Corbin took all this good-naturedly. When they came to the fork that led to Froghollow, Corbin let Tator turn toward home. Knowing he was headed for fresh straw and a good brushing, the colt picked up the pace, almost trotting as they left Riverton and entered the forest.

Chapter Four

Froghollow

Sometime later they reached Froghollow, where true to its name the frogs and bog-yelpers were singing their nightly serenade. Corbin's father Tylag and his older brothers had already gone to bed, but fortunately Aunt Suzenna was still up. She did indeed have several fine helpings of her stew and more than a dozen corn muffins left over. She ladled each of them a fresh glass of chilled milk to wash the meal down. The three young men made quick work of the lot of it, leaving behind only crumbs and grease spots on the checkered tablecloth.

“Can we camp in your yard tonight, Aunt Suzenna?” asked Jak humbly. Brand and everyone else could see the sparkle in his brown eyes. “It's an awfully long trip back up to the common, and since we brought all our own gear we won't be any problem.”

Aunt Suzenna would hear nothing of it. They were marched first into the washroom and then up the steps to the guest bedroom where they stripped off their clothes and sank into the softest feather beds that either of them could recall having touched.

“Now you boys go right to sleep, you hear?” Aunt Suzenna told them. “I know you've been taking care of yourselves out there on the Isle, but you're under my roof now. I don't want to hear that you kept Corbin up all night playing Jiggers and Swap-Cards. We arise early for chores in Froghollow. There's no place for lay-abouts.”

They assured her that they would be up with the sun to help with the chores. She bade them goodnight and bustled out of the room, dousing the candles as she went. As soon as the door was shut, Jak groaned aloud in ecstasy. “Isn't this grand? I've forgotten what a proper down bed feels like… Just the smell of it is heaven!”

Brand frowned a bit in the darkness. He rubbed the clean sheets and deeply inhaled the aroma of the bed. It reminded him of his mother and father. He even felt a bit homesick.

“Aren't we taking a bit too freely from our clansmen?” he felt compelled to ask his brother. “It seems like none of the family come out to Rabing Isle to visit us anymore. I remember the summer barbecues out on the verandah. Fresh melons and toasted mussels, dad served them every year.”

Jak scoffed, but fell silent. Brand knew that their increasing isolation from the rest of the clan bothered him too. He had yet to

take a wife, being too wrapped up in keeping Rabing Isle going to be out courting. The Isle had been family land for many generations back. He wasn't about to be the one who let it wither and die.

Sometime later Brand awoke with a start. He blinked, having just been on the edge of sleep. It took him a moment to figure out why he had awoken, and then he heard it again. A flapping, fluttering sound. He rose up on one elbow, looking around the room. Pale moonlight poured into the room, as the moon was nearly full. Jak was asleep, looking younger with his face relaxed and the cares of the day forgotten.

Brand was on the verge of laying back down when he heard the sound again. He turned to the window. There, silhouetted partially by the moon, was a very large horned owl. It's huge yellow eyes were luminous orbs that radiated an eldritch light. It was staring directly at him, directly into his eyes. While he watched in surprise, it dipped its head and tore at the window sash with its powerful beak. The motion forced the bird to flap its wings to stay in place. Brand was shocked to see that it had already managed to pry up the window an inch or two from the sill.

“What kind of changeling are you?” demanded Brand, sitting up and swinging his feet out of the bedclothes.

Jak came awake with a start. He looked at Brand, and then saw the owl. “What's going on?”

Brand pointed. “It's trying to get in!” he hissed. “It's bewitched!”

Just then, there came a creaking sound from the hall. Very quietly, the brass door handle twisted and the door edged open. Jak scrambled up and fumbled beneath the bed for his crossbow, which he had stashed there when Aunt Suzenna wasn't looking. He had it out and pointed toward the door before he realized it wasn't cocked. With practiced motions, he bent the prod back and loaded a bolt into the guiding slot.

The door was open now, and an indistinct figure entered the room. It held a candle, cupped by one hand so as to dampen the light.

“Corbin?” breathed Brand.

The hand dropped from the candle, and Corbin's face was illuminated. “You're awake?”

Jak made a sound of disgust and alarm. “I nearly shot you, Corbin! Any fool knows to knock before entering!”

“Shhh!” Corbin hushed them, easing the door shut behind him. “My father will hear, or worse my mother.” He then revealed the purpose of his visit, producing a deck of stained and scarred playing cards and a jar full of polished sticks and betting beads. Tucked beneath his arm he had a loaf of bread, with a packet of cheese and a

small jug of berrywine riding in his pockets. “It's your own stuff,” he said, tapping the jug proudly. “Rabing Isle makes the best berrywine still.”

Jak groaned, unloading the crossbow. “You think of nothing but your stomach.”

“And of games,” added Corbin with a chuckle. “By the way, why are you two awake and so flustered?”

Brand pointed to the window, but the owl had fled. They explained the incident and inspected the damage the bird's talons and beak had done. Corbin pursed his lips in concern. “An owl you say? Looks more like an eagle, by the look of these marks.”

“It was strange-when it looked at me, I felt that it wasn't afraid and that it wanted to find me. There was no fear at all in that creature. Perhaps it was some kind of changeling.”

It was Jak's turn to be skeptical. “For a fact, things have been odd this autumn, and the Harvest Moon is almost upon us. But I don't think that the Faerie would break their pact with the River Haven just to get at the likes of you and me. What could be their purpose?”

“Still, this all seems mighty queer to me,” said Corbin. As he spoke, he methodically set up a table in between the two beds, laying out the food, wine and game pieces. He didn't even bother to ask if the others wanted to play. There was no need.

Brand could keep quiet about what was plaguing his mind no longer. He told Corbin everything about the shadowy horseman he had seen earlier on the shore. Corbin listened intently while he divided the betting beads evenly, dealt the cards and arranged the polished sticks in the appropriate patterns. When Brand had finished, Corbin shook his head and scratched his red beard. “I know of no one like that, nor have I heard anything of such a man. But this is not to say that I doubt you, cousin,” he said hurriedly, cutting off Brand's protests.

Soon, they grew tired of discussing it and turned to the games and the food. Brand was quite tired, but nothing could keep him awake like food and games. The three played Jiggers and Swap-Cards long into the night. They kept their voices low so as not to awaken Corbin's family. Corbin won most of the hands, but Brand was just as glad to have something to keep away thoughts and dreams of the shadow man at the river and the giant bird that had torn up the windowsill to get at him.

Chapter Five

The Candle in the Window

Morning came too soon and they had to fight themselves awake. Never did their beds felt better than when they tried to leave them for the cold dawn air. Shivering, they washed up and dressed in fresh clothes before tramping down the creaking spiral staircase to answer Aunt Suzenna's call to breakfast. She set a grand table that morning. Corbin's two older brothers Sam and Barlo were there in addition to his father, Tylag.

“Good to have you boys here this mornin',” said Tylag, spooning a heavy portion of mushrooms and bacon onto his plate. Brand could hardly wait to get his hands onto the serving bowl. To his joy and Corbin's obvious chagrin, his uncle passed the bowl to the guests first. “We'll be needing help to bring across a heavy load today. The Glints have brought a mighty big offering, and they've made a deal with me to handle the crossing of the livestock.”

Brand and Jak tried their best not to grimace visibly. The Glints maintained the largest flocks of sheep on the river, and were well-known to give generously for the offering. More than a hundred fat sheep and twice as many sacks of meal were likely to be involved. At the same moment, they looked at Corbin, trying to catch a trace of guilt in his eyes.

Corbin seemed preoccupied with his milk glass. His fork too, seemed to have become worthy of study. The brothers exchanged knowing glances. Corbin had duped them into this “chore” which would likely amount to an all-day venture of sweating and straining. Brand sighed quietly, finally getting hold of the serving bowl and giving himself a heaping load of steaming mushrooms and glistening bacon. They should have known not to trust a ferryman's son who offered them free food.

“We'll be glad to help, Uncle Tylag,” said Jak with all the good grace he could muster.

“Don't be worrying, boys. We'll work those corn muffins and that midnight wine into muscle instead of fat,” chuckled Aunt Suzenna. Jak and Brand glanced at her sharply, and saw she was smiling. Their Uncle Tylag, too, wore a cagey grin. It was clear that their midnight festivities had not gone unnoticed.

Corbin seemed to hunker down a bit, attempting to avoid attention. It was impossible for him to truly reduce his great bulk, and

the only effect was a lowering of the head and a hunching of the shoulders. He perked up when the serving bowl came close, however. Brand and Jak were working on the next one, loaded with a hash of green potatoes, radishes and spiced mutton. It was a specialty of Aunt Suzenna's. Just the aroma made Brand feel better compensated for the day to come.

Chapter Six

The Ferry

Hours later they pulled the last load across the rippling waters from the northern shore of the river to the southern tip of Stone Island where Tylag's ferry landed. Brand had discovered where Corbin's muscles had been earned. His own arms burned by now, equaled only by the burning of his hands inside the thick leather gloves that his uncle had given him. Each time he grabbed hold of the thick rope and hauled in unison with his cousins, his biceps seemed to groan aloud. This groaning, however, if it was audible, was entirely drowned out by the frightened bleating of the sheep that were roped in a cluster at the center of the ferry. The river gurgled and splashed over the timbers of the ferry, which was primarily a large platform of logs lashed together and supported with crossbeams. Gray with long exposure, the wood of the ferry was seamed and cracked and prone to giving splinters. Brand glanced back at Jak, who looked as winded as Brand felt. Jak's blond hair was matted with sweat and stuck to his forehead in dark rat-tails.

As the day wore on it grew increasingly cold, unseasonably cold. The wind blew from the west and there was the hint of snow in it. They were approaching the cliffs of Stone Island when Brand saw the shadow man again. Up atop the whale-backed ridges of the cliff stood a dark figure on a horse, his cloak a rippling black shadow of a shadow. Brand's breath was ragged. His hoarse shout of alarm was carried away by the river winds. What the others did notice was that the line had slackened. Jak tapped his shoulder, shouting something that Brand never heard. Brand simply stared until the shadow man turned his horse and slid into the shadow of the pine trees that topped the cliffs.

“What's wrong with you, boy?” demanded Tylag. His uncle's voice came close and strong in his ear, and Brand made a croaking sound in reply. Tylag had once been the chief of the Riverton Constabulary, and his old training showed in times like this.

“He's gaping like a gigged bog-yelper,” said Corbin's older brother Sam. He had massive arms, the biggest in the family. He walked with a dragging foot, and everyone knew he worked his arms all the harder to make up for it.

“Here now, off with you!” ordered Tylag, waving away his sons. “Back to your stations before we swamp the ferry with all you lot

standing at one corner."

Brand shook himself, suddenly aware that he was sitting on the cold wet logs of the ferry, his right hand still clutching the thick landline. He noticed that his face was wet too, as river water had lapped up and splashed him. His eyes focused on his uncle, and then upon Jak and Corbin, all of whom looked worried.

"Did you see him?" Brand asked.

"Who?" demanded Tylag. He helped Brand to his feet. "See who?"

Brand looked to Jak, who looked even more concerned than before. Jak turned to look at the western shore of the river, into the Deepwood. "No, no, that way," said Brand, gesturing up at the cliffs. "Up there."

"He was on Stone Island?" demanded Jak.

"The shadow horseman?" asked Corbin.

Tylag was looking from one to another of the boys in confusion. "What's going on here?" he demanded gruffly. "I'm not accustomed to ignorance when aboard my own ferry!"

Brand, who was feeling better, stood up unaided and quickly explained. This time, however, he added in his feelings of numbness and cold dread. When he had finished, Corbin told the story of the great owl at the window the night before.

Tylag was left rubbing his heavy growth of beard, which was even thicker and redder than Corbin's was. Corbin's brother Sam scoffed and told them they were all scared of their own shadows, literally, but Tylag halted him with a raised hand. "No, no, this might fit," said Tylag slowly. He looked older somehow, more worried and daunted than Brand had ever seen him. Brand felt responsible for everything and suddenly wished he had kept the whole thing to himself. His Uncle Tylag had never looked weak. Even when Brand's father, Tylag's brother, had died, he had looked stronger than he did now.

"Your Aunt Suzenna saw one of the Wee Folk just a few nights ago," said Tylag.

"One of the Wee Folk?" gasped Brand, feeling a rush of wonder and fear all at once.

"Yes, Mama-cat chased him off. He was after her kittens in the barn," Tylag grunted and half-smiled. "She always was a good ratter. She came home with a scrap of his coattails in her claws."

"But what has that got to do with the shadow horseman?"

Tylag didn't answer for a moment, clearly he was thinking hard. "We must get news of these events to the Riverton council," he muttered at last.

They pressed him for answers on the rest of the journey, but he only shook his head at them, deep in thought. "It's been a strange

autumn," was all he would say. Tylag had been the head of the Rabing clan since Brand's father had died, as he had been the second oldest child of Gram Rabing's family. Old Gram had passed the clan leadership to her children on her seventieth birthday, and now that she was nearly ninety she rarely did more than offer a word or two of sage advice. As the head of the Rabing clan, Tylag was a key member of the Riverton Council.

Brand pulled the ropes along with the rest of them, his strength had returned if not his peace of mind. He could not imagine what was going on, but felt it had to be something terrible. Could the Pact with the Faerie have been broken? Wasn't the great Offering that the folk of the Haven had spent so long gathering this hard season enough?

It took only a short while to get the ferry to the stony shores of the eastern point where a cart and oxen awaited. The men loaded the cart quickly, with many wary glances cast up at the ridge. Brand himself felt cold dread and guilt for having put so many years onto his uncle's face.

Tylag seemed to pick up on his mood. He stumped over and threw an arm around Brand. He squeezed with this one arm, giving him a crude hug. "You're getting so tall boy, I can hardly look you in the eye!" he said, some of his normal bravado returning. Brand noted that he was indeed several inches taller than his uncle was, although not nearly as wide. "I want you and your brother to come with me to meet the clan leaders. You too, Corbin," he said over his shoulder.

The boys nodded and a few hours later-after a fine lunch where Aunt Suzenna surpassed herself once again-they all headed back to Riverton. Corbin and Jak rode behind Tator with the load of melons and berrywine casks, but this time Brand rode on Tylag's on his ox-cart. Ahead of them, the oxen lowed. All around them, the sheep that Corbin's brothers were herding to the common bleated and rang the bells at their necks. Brand glanced back wistfully many times at Froghollow. He had the sinking feeling that he was leaving something behind forever.

Chapter Seven

Telyn

On the way, Tylag grilled Brand about the details of his encounters. Before they had left, he had inspected the damage done by the owl to his windowsill as well. He had waved away Jak and Brand's apologies for the damage as irrelevant. Brand answered all the questions as best he could. It seemed clear after a time that Tylag was searching for something, some kind of hint, perhaps.

“Was this man wearing clothes, would you say?” he asked, looking at Brand with a peculiar intensity.

“Yes, a cloak at least. Although it seemed to be of some kind of odd, flowing material. Not woolen, I'm sure of it.”

Tylag nodded. “What about headgear? Did he bear a hat or some type of helm?”

Brand shook his head.

“Would you say that the man on the cliffs just now was the same, or a different one?”

“Most likely the same,” reported Brand. Could there be many of these shadow men? The thought was alarming. He turned on the driver's board and eyed the forests around them. Suddenly, they seemed far less friendly. “Do you know this man?”

“I should say not!” shouted Tylag with sudden intensity. He was loud enough to attract the attention of Jak and Corbin, who turned to look at them. Seeing Brand's uncomprehending stare, Tylag waved away his concern with his large hands. “It matters nothing, boy. What is important is that I get you to see Myrrdin straight away.”

“Myrrdin!” gasped Brand. “The Clanless One?”

Tylag nodded firmly. “The same.”

Brand fell silent for a time. It seemed that all his worst fears were being realized. Myrrdin was a traveling man from distant lands who aided with the Harvest Moon ceremonies each year. It was clear he was no peddler, and no one knew where his home was, or even if he had one. Some wagging tongues had gone so far as to label him a wizard, although most of the clearer heads scoffed at this idea. Wizards were myths-the talk of legends like the stories about the Dragon's Eyes, the colored jewels of power. The Faerie, however-they were very real.

If this involved Myrrdin, then it certainly involved the Faerie as well. The thought of it made Brand go cold inside. All he could think

of was the old stories that his mother had told him as a child. The terrible wonders of the Faerie were without number.

They traveled the rest of the way to Riverton without talking much. The usual festive mood that buoyed up the last few days before the Harvest Moon feast was absent. Even Tator seemed dispirited, his tail and ears drooping.

They clopped and swayed their way into the Riverton, greeted by passersby on the road. As they entered the town, Corbin's brothers led aside the sheep to the stockyards. There were many complements on the generosity of the offerings they were bringing. Brand and Jak swelled with pride. They were running Rabing Isle on their own, but they weren't slackers. Their father had brought no more or less to the Harvest Moon in years past.

They wound up the hill to where the nicer houses and the largest buildings were. In the center of town, where the guildhouses and the shops huddled close to the road, there was even a section of cobblestones. Tator perked up here, as if he were proud to pull his cart through the best street in town.

It was here that they stopped before the gates of the manor house of the Drake clan. The Drakes were the wealthiest and most influential clan on Stone Island. It was at their ancestral home that the clan leaders held council. Although it wasn't as spacious as the common room of the Spotted Hog Inn, where the town meetings were generally held, it afforded much more privacy.

“I'll go on in and announce us,” said Tylag, climbing down with a grunt. The driver's board straightened in relief. Brand watched as Tylag walked through the ancient iron gates and up the path to the manor. The gates were never locked; in fact, it had been so many years since they had been shut that the hinges had frozen with rust.

Brand felt a slight rocking of the wagon. He looked around and was surprised to see Telyn sitting beside him, just biting into an apple. She grinned at his expression.

“My, but you're getting tall,” she said.

“Telyn!” he breathed, unable to get out more.

“You should look behind you more often,” she commented. Brand made a wry face, but it was half-hearted. She was so pretty, even with her hair rather stringy-looking and unkempt and her stained clothes smelling of the tannery vats. The delicacy of her face and her gray-blue eyes came through all that. He felt his heart leap just at the sight of her. He watched a drop of apple juice run down her hand for a moment before he was able to reply.

“You're always sneaking up on me!” he said finally.

“I like to be unpredictable,” she responded with a flip of her head. She smiled at him again, and it was like sunlight breaking through a

gray cloud. She took another bite of her apple and then frowned, tossing it over the wall of Drake manor.

“What are you doing?”

“It was a cull,” she said with a shrug. She stretched luxuriously, pushing her fists into the air over her head. “Just as most of those melons you've dragged all the way in from the island are probably culls.”

Brand's brow furrowed. “We wouldn't do that!”

“Well, I would.”

“Hello, Scraper,” said Corbin from the ground. He had left his cart and now stood with Jak. Both of them grinned up at Brand. Brand blushed, feeling the blood tingle all the way down to his knees.

“Hello, Corbin-Jak,” Telyn answered, fluttering her hand at them. She produced another apple and a small sharp knife from her nondescript garment. Slicing the fruit with quick efficient strokes, she began munching on the wedges. “Do you fancy an apple?” she asked Brand, who was staring at her. She winked at him, and he blushed all over again.

Corbin and Jak withdrew to the manor gate to have a look into the courtyard. They kept a discreet eye on Brand and his visitor while they talked.

“I wish they wouldn't call you that,” he said.

“What? Scraper? That's what everyone calls me,” she said, unconcerned.

He looked troubled. “But it isn't a very pretty name.”

She smiled. “Look, I scrape the fur off hides at my father's vats. Most of the Fob clan works in the tanneries. The name doesn't bother me. Besides, my work has taught me to be handy with a knife.”

“Okay. Where did you get all the apples?” Brand asked, attempting to shift the conversation. He never seemed to know exactly what to say to Telyn. Somehow these days his thoughts were muddled and never came out right when she was around. It had been different when they had been children.

“Where do you think? From clan Thunderfoot's offering. They have the best orchards in the Haven, after all.”

Brand was scandalized. “You took them from the offering?” he demanded in disbelief.

Telyn only shrugged her pretty shoulders again. “Better that I enjoy them than some prancing Faerie that would as soon spoil my milk or lead astray a lamb as look at me.”

Brand doubted that the Faerie would be so aloof to her, but he didn't say as much. Instead, he changed the subject again. “I saw a candle burning in your window last night. At least, I think I did.”

Telyn slid her eyes around without moving her head and

transfixed him with a penetrating gaze. Brand was immediately speechless. She swallowed her bite of apple, and then straightened purposefully, taking Brand's hand in her own. “Are you the one then?” she asked.

Brand gaped at her. He wanted to tell her that yes, he was the one, no matter that he wasn't yet full grown, no matter that his beard was barely enough to bother shaving each morning, but all he could do was stare.

“Are you the one?” she repeated in a hushed voice. “I've had one of those feelings Brand, you know, like when we were kids.”

Brand nodded, remembering. “You mean like when you knew Gram Rabing had fallen off the ladder and found her? And when you told me not to let my parents go on the river, that day…” he swallowed, unable to continue.

“Yes,” she hissed, leaning even closer. She was in easy kissing range now, and it made it difficult for Brand to think clearly. “Yes, just like that-only different, too. I've felt that someone is coming. Maybe several people. I've felt that they need help in getting here. That's why I've been burning a candle in my window each night. I don't know who, but I know they must get here soon.”

“Before the Harvest Moon,” whispered Brand.

She nodded very seriously.

Brand thought about the Harvest Moon and everything it meant to the River Folk. He tried to look calm, but he really wanted to shudder. He controlled himself with difficulty, managing a small nod. He didn't want to look like a scared little boy in front of Telyn.

Chapter Eight

The Spotted Hog

“I've been seeing and feeling odd things as well,” he said. Then he told her about the shadow man and the owl, managing to hold her hand in his and lean close to her fair face the entire time. He only edited the truth slightly, not mentioning that he had slipped to the deck of the ferry in numb fear.

Telyn's eyes unfocused and flittered from spot to spot while he spoke. She nodded to herself frequently. Brand knew she was thinking rapidly, her quick mind coming up with a scheme. He could recall her looking like that before he had gotten into the most daring of his childhood adventures. The River only knew what she would come up with.

“All right,” she said, squeezing his hand. “I know now what we must do. I'll catch up with you tonight.” With that, she darted forward and kissed him on the cheek. Their eyes locked for a moment.

“Brand! Corbin! Jak!” came Tylag's voice, booming over the manor wall. He heard the crunch of boots on gravel. “Come to me. We have a problem.”

Brand turned to look back at the gates. He swallowed, facing the prospect of entering Drake manor for the first time since he was a small boy at his father's knee. He turned back to say farewell to Telyn, but discovered that she was gone. He looked up and down the street and thought he caught a glimpse of her slipping around a corner, but he couldn't be sure.

“Come on, Brand,” said Jak. He followed Corbin into the courtyard. With frequent glances back over his shoulder, Brand scrambled down and passed between the rusty gates after them.

Tylag's brow was a storm of furrows and he rubbed at his scowling face with his fist. “Myrrdin is not here. He has yet to arrive.”

The three younger men all exchanged concerned looks. Brand felt more ill at ease because of Tylag's manner. His actions spoke louder than words. Tylag was usually full of bluster and never daunted by anything.

“But, who will present the Offering if he is not here?” asked Brand.

Tylag shot him a grim stare. “None other can perform it properly,” he said. “None have the craft.”

“The Offering must be made. It is as simple as that,” said Jak,

shrugging. “If it comes down to it, I will make the offering for Rabing Isle myself. The Pact can't be allowed to fail.”

“Yes,” said Corbin, his speech slow and rational. “The Offering will be made. It is not that, but the etiquette of the ceremony that will be flawed. We must recall that the ceremony is as important to the Faerie as the Offering itself.”

“We are only the simple folk of the River Haven,” said Jak, spreading his hands. “What can be done?”

“Perhaps we can find the Clanless One,” said Brand. “Surely, there must be some way of locating him.”

“Sensibly, he would be on his way here, sailing on the Berrywine perhaps, or crossing the Border Downs,” Corbin said thoughtfully. Brand felt he could see the cogs working in his mind. Corbin wasn't a fast thinker, but his ideas were often more penetrating. “Where does he usually hail from at this time of year?”

Tylag, who had been staring at nothing while tugging on his beard, glanced up at his question. “What? Oh, well, it depends. Most years he comes done from the north, from the wilds of Snowdonia, where he spends most of his time, it seems.”

Brand's eyes blinked twice at the mention of Snowdonia. He could only imagine what those white-peaked mountains were like, what strange creatures might dwell there. “From Rabing Isle,” he said half to himself, “you can see the crags of Snowdon itself on a clear summer's day.”

Corbin looked at him. He paused for a long moment before speaking. “It would seem likely that Myrrdin would pass Rabing Isle then-if he were going to come by water.”

“Yes, unless he came through the High Marshes or the Deepwood.”

Tylag smacked his fists together decisively. “Right! That would be the way of it. The thing to do is post a lookout up at Rabing Isle. You must return home tonight, Jak. We must watch the other approaches as well. Something has delayed him and it is likely that he needs help.”

“What could have delayed him?” asked Jak, frowning.

Tylag made a sweeping gesture with his thick arms. “How should I know? Anything! His boat could have sprung a leak. His horse could have come up lame.”

“If he's on horseback, I doubt he will swim past Rabing Isle tonight,” grumbled Jak. It was plain to Brand that his brother didn't relish the idea of returning home and missing tonight's celebration on the Riverton Commons.

It was Tylag's turn to frown. “Boys, I am the leader of Clan Rabing, is this not so?”

All of them nodded. Jak's nod was noticeably glum.

“I will not have it said that the Offering was rejected and the Pact broken due to the inaction of Clan Rabing,” he boomed at them, hooking his thumbs in his wide belt and rocking on his heels while eyeing them each in turn. “I ask again, Jak, will you return home and try to escort Myrrdin to Riverton before the Harvest Moon?”

“Of course,” said Jak, straightening and dropping the frown.

Thinking of Telyn, Brand gave a tiny sigh of regret. “It will take two to handle the skiff properly, even when it is unloaded. I will come with you.”

Tylag nodded approvingly. He slapped his son on the back suddenly. “Corbin will go as well. His back is as strong as the river is wide. Besides, I would not think of breaking you boys up on such a night as this.”

Corbin looked startled, but said nothing.

“When should we set out, Uncle?” asked Jak.

“Straight away, nothing is more important. Get yourselves some lunch up at the Spotted Hog,” he said, handing Corbin a silver half-crown. “I must be getting back to the council meeting.”

“What about the shadow man?” asked Brand, his voice hushed. “Shouldn't we tell the council about it?”

Tylag pursed his lips and gazed back up at the manor, as if seeing the meeting hall and the clan leaders within. “They will take it better from my lips than from yours,” he said finally. “Only Myrrdin will properly be able to puzzle out this mystery, so it is all the more important that you find him and tell him what you have seen. In any case, the Pact must not be broken. We will send men into the Deepwood and the High Marshes. Myrrdin's attendance is critical.”

He bade them farewell and crunched gravel on his way back to the manor. Brand watched him go regretfully. He didn't relish the trip back to Rabing Isle under the watchful stare of the shadow man.

“Look at it this way,” said Corbin cheerfully. He threw his arm around the shoulders of Brand and Jak, having to reach up in Brand's case and down in Jak's. “At least my brothers will be troubled with the burden of delivering the offerings.”

“I also see it as justice for this morning's surprise chores,” added Jak. They all laughed at this and walked together to the Spotted Hog. On their way in, they met up with four Hoot boys who were just leaving. The sour smell of ale was strong about them. They scowled darkly at the Rabing boys. The entryway way to the common room was low-ceilinged, and they all were forced to shoulder their way past one another in close quarters.

“Merling fodder,” muttered one of the Hoot boys, a skinny slouching youth with hair that stuck up at random angles. Brand knew

him to be Slet, a dockworker. Another of them snorted in amusement.

Jak reacted as if stung. He grabbed Slet's tunic, halting the two groups in the cloakroom. “What did you say?” he demanded. Corbin put a heavy hand on Jak's shoulder, but Jak ignored him. He only stared into Slet's face, awaiting an answer.

Slet's eyes slid around to the faces of his companions. None of them met his gaze, not wanting trouble. Slet took a moment to spit onto the floor between Jak's wading boots. “Nuthin'“ he said. “For now.”

Jak released Slet with a visible effort of will. The two groups separated without further incident. Corbin ordered lunch with the silver half-crown, which Brand knew was much too much money for a prince's lunch in Riverton, but such was the generosity of their uncle. With the rest of the money he made several other purchases before returning to the table.

Jak ate the lunch of beef and kidney pie without interest. Brand and Corbin exchanged glances. They had hoped his mood would have improved with food and time, but it hadn't. “Jak, I'm sure they didn't mean…” began Brand, but his brother cut him off.

“You don't remember rightly. You were too young, and I was younger than you are now. When the River took our parents, they said it was merlings. It looked like everything was finished… Everything was too much…” he said. He stabbed his fork into his kidney pie and forced down another bite.

Brand thought about what it would be like if he were left to care for Rabing Isle, all of it, right now. It wasn't a pleasant thought. He turned to Corbin and grinned in surprise. Corbin already had the tavern's Jump-Pin board out and was setting the metal pegs up for a three-way match. Without a word, he made a move and pushed it to Jak. Jak ate two more bites before acknowledging the game, then moved with a sigh and pushed the board to Brand. The three ate and played in silence. As usual, Corbin won.

After the meal, they walked down to the docks in a dark mood. Although the sun was still bright, the autumn air seemed colder, the wind stealing the warmth from their bodies and stinging their eyes with their whipping hair. Corbin soon threw up his hood as he often did. When they got to the dock and made ready to board the skiff, they were surprised to find Telyn sitting in the prow, already in the act of casting off.

“You'd better hurry up and jump down. The current is pulling me out.”

“What are you doing here?” demanded Jak gruffly, jumping into the boat and snatching the lines from her hands.

Telyn stood up in the skiff as well and put her hands on her hips.

“I'm going with you.”

Jak glowered at her, then shot a look at Brand who was climbing into the mid-section. Corbin followed him. Jak tossed the coiled line down and went to release the stern moorings, throwing up his hands in a gesture of disgust and surrender.

“What's with your brother?” asked Telyn with some concern.

“He's just in a bad mood,” Brand told her, explaining the events at the tavern briefly.

“Well, I'm no Silure, nor am I a Hoot,” Telyn pointed out.

Brand looked at her, suddenly realizing that she might well take offense. He was quick to assure her that it was just his brother's mood.

Telyn nodded and finally smiled at him. This brought a special warm feeling to Brand for the second time that day. “How did you know that we were going back to Rabing Isle?” he asked.

“I hear things,” she said, reaching up and giving his ear a playful tug. “Besides, I'm following on the track of something right now, and I'm not letting go until I learn what it's about. Today, I learned that you are part of it, Brand Rabing.”

Brand nodded, not really knowing what she was talking about, but finding it easy to agree. He could think of no one he would rather have aboard for the journey. The sails were of great use now that the skiff was running high and empty and the afternoon winds were up. They were borne upriver even faster than the current had sent them down.

Chapter Nine

Telyn's Signal

Traveling up the river Brand had a nostalgic, almost melancholy feeling come over him. Everything seemed to be changing, becoming more exciting and more ominous by the day. The seasons were shifting, getting colder rapidly. Even while the sun was still high in the sky, he could feel the chill of the cold night ahead in the wind. He eyed the scudding gray clouds and wondered if it might not snow tonight. It almost never snowed before the Harvest Moon, but anything seemed possible this autumn.

“Everything seems odd to me, Telyn,” he said wistfully. They sat in bow of the skiff, while Jak gripped the tiller and Corbin tended the sails. By silent agreement, his clansmen had arranged for him to be alone with her.

She didn't answer him right away. The skiff's mast creaked and the river bubbled and splashed as the wind pushed the boat against the current. Telyn dangled her fingers in the white foam that curled up the skiff's dark hull.

“Something is definitely wrong,” she agreed finally. She stretched out and Brand was taken by the way her hair fluttered freely in the wind.

They spent much of the trip in quiet conversation, and by the time Rabing Isle hove into view, Brand found that he had sidled close to her and could feel her warmth. He was almost sorry to see the journey end.

“Well,” said Jak, clapping him on the shoulder as they moored the skiff at their home dock in a tiny green-water cove. “At least we've seen nothing more of the shadow man.”

Brand felt a surge of well-being to be home again. The light was failing and the wind was downright cold now, but all of them were smiling. Rabing Isle was a beautiful place, full of good memories for all of them.

They marched up through the apple tree grove to the foot of the only hill on the island. They followed the winding gravel path through the vegetable garden, its leafy green growth fading to brown now with the onset of winter. Corbin carried two weighty rucksacks with him, Brand noticed with a smile. One probably full of games and storybooks and the other doubtless packed with extra food.

“I hope you didn't give up all the year's crop of berrywine to the

Offering," he said in a leading fashion as the heavy log walls came into view between the towering berry bush hedges that surrounded the house.

"No more than the customary one part in seven," Jak assured him. He gestured toward the winery, where the family press and fermentation tanks were sheltered. "If you wish to inspect our stocks personally…"

Corbin grinned. "Ah, I'm sure that your cellars are more than adequate for my needs."

Telyn poked him in the side. "I for one have my doubts!"

They all laughed and headed into the house. The house was made of rough-hewn logs with mortar filling the cracks. The windows were all shuttered and the second story wore a steep roof of shingles like a farmer's wide-brimmed hat. The house was impressively large, having been built to hold several families. Four generations ago, it had housed many people, but now most of the rooms were empty and layered in cold dust.

Telyn raced forward to the stairs with a delighted cry. "It has been years since I rode this banister!" she said, gripping the big rounded post at the bottom with a grin. "Remember when I pushed you out of the big yew tree out front Brand?"

Brand tried to look sour. "How could I forget?"

"Perhaps you should chop some fresh wood for the fire, Brand," suggested Jak in a tone that Brand knew made it an order. This didn't bother him, however. Jak was the master of the house, and in any case, he was simply glad to be home.

"As I recall, we have two axes," Brand said, eyeing Corbin.

Corbin grinned and followed him out into the yard. They retrieved the axes from the woodshed and set to work. Soon, the chill air was forgotten as they worked up a good sweat. Chopping wood was something of a competition for them. Corbin had the weight and strength to split a log with a single stroke, but Brand had the finesse to be able to do it more often.

"You'll never chop faster than I, you know that," said Brand, speaking in gasps between swings.

"You're as competitive as your brother, in your own way," observed Corbin. Chips flew and caught in their hair. The thunking sound of axes falling filled the yard.

"Ha! If that's not the river calling the shore brown!" snorted Brand. "I'm not the one who would rook Gram Rabing herself in a game of Swap-cards!"

After this brief exchange, they saved their breath for lifting their axes. The wood piled up high and fast at their feet. For speed, it was nearly a draw, although Brand's pile was marginally larger. When

both of them had several armloads, they headed back into the house.

Inside they all fell to talking about old times, and even Jak seemed to have shed his dark mood. Corbin talked while working in the kitchen. He donned an apron that probably hadn't been worn since their parents had been lost and set to work on a meal of astounding variety and proportions. As Brand had suspected, many foodstuffs were packed away in his rucksacks, bought at the Spotted Hog with the remains of Tylag's money. They had no objections as hosts, however, recalling the morning's “chores” and the vast amounts that Corbin could put away in a single evening.

They feasted on smoked duck, fresh onion-bread, goat cheese and boiled merling eggs. For dessert, big, crescent slices of broadleaf melon were handed around. After dinner and washing up, they gathered at the fireplace and sipped berrywine. Jak built up a big fire with twice as much wood as usual. Outside, the wind had come up and even began to howl.

“There's no doubt of it, we're having our first winter storm tonight,” said Jak. He put his feet up over the side of his overstuffed leather chair, in just the fashion that their father had long ago complained about, but now that he was the master of the house, none spoke. “Still, it's good to have friends in the house again.”

Brand felt a wash of well being. It was good to be home with friends when winter's first breath was blowing outside. The house had been empty for too long. He looked at Telyn and his thoughts drifted pleasantly. She was brushing her hair out and staring at the fire. Her lips curved up in a delicate smile, and he knew she was aware of his attention. A blush, heated even more deeply by the wine in his belly, crept up his neck and cheeks.

“Swap-cards, anyone?” asked Corbin, nonchalantly. Jak rolled his eyes to the ceiling then finished his wine with a gulp. His boots came down with a thud. “Okay, but this time you lose,” said Jak. Brand seconded the motion.

Telyn played for three hands, winning two of them. Corbin's eyebrows were comically high as he watched her fingers flutter over the cards and nimbly snatch up the polished sticks and set them in the appropriate patterns with a flourish. Next to his deliberate movements, hers were like lightning. Still, she somehow seemed distracted. After the three hands, she decided to retire early.

Brand watched her go up the creaking steps with concern. The allure of the game was too much to allow for worries, however, and the night wore on quickly. The majority of the betting beads ended up on Jak's side this time. Corbin took the loss with easy confidence. “Every dog has his day.”

Jak slapped his legs and began pulling his waders back on.

“Well,” he said, “It's high time we set out lamps for Myrrdin. If he's out there on the river tonight, he'll need them just to avoid capsizing on the shoals.”

Brand made ready to go with him, but Corbin volunteered for the duty, claiming he needed the exercise. Corbin donned his waders and they all helped Jak with readying six heavy hurricane lamps of tarnished brass. Each tall lamp had to have its wicks adjusted and its oil vessels filled. Carrying three lamps each, Jak and Corbin threw open the door and stamped outside. Brand was surprised by the wind's strength, it tousled everything in the room, spraying the swap-cards like fallen leaves and making the fire gust up and sputter. He pushed the door shut after them and tended the fire and packed away the cards.

Crouched before the crackling flames with a poker in his hand, he felt eyes on his back. He turned and Telyn was there, standing just a few feet behind him. He blinked in surprise. “How do you do that? I know this house so well, no one can move through it without me hearing their steps on the boards.”

“The wind drowns out sound,” she said with a slight shrug and a tiny smile. She pushed back her hair from her face. “Besides, I'm no great thumping river-boy with wading boots on.”

“But I know every creak and groan those stairs make…” he protested. It just didn't seem possible, but then, she had always moved differently.

She silenced him with a finger to her lips. “It doesn't matter,” she extended her delicate white hand. “Come with me. I want to show you something.”

Brand hesitated for a moment, then set aside the poker and took her hand. The look in her eyes told him she was serious about something. She led him up the steps to the old nursery.

“You're sleeping in here?” he asked.

She nodded. “It's the room I have the best memories of.”

Then he noticed the candle in the window. It was a single taper of waxy white tallow, not like the ones they had kept in the house.

“But the shutters are closed,” he pointed out. “You can't hope to signal Myrrdin with that.”

“Not Myrrdin, necessarily-”

“But it doesn't matter who you're trying to signal,” he said, still staring at the tiny flame. It bothered him, somehow. He couldn't put his finger on it, but there was something odd about it. “No one can see it through the shutters, much less the hedge outside. Only the hurricane lamps can be seen from the river, and then only if they are on lampposts at the shoreline. The River knows that a candle would just blow out if you opened the shutters, anyway.”

Telyn silenced him with a single finger touched to his lips this time. She gave him one of her knowing smiles. “How did you see the one in my window last night, then?” she asked.

His mouth sagged open. “Are you saying that-that your shutters were closed?”

She made no attempt to answer. Instead, she guided him out of the room with light touches of her hands. Hardly aware of it, he moved at her slightest touch, and soon found himself standing in the hall. “You should know better than to be caught in a lady's room this late at night,” she scolded, closing the door.

“Wait!”

“Good night,” she said sweetly.

He was left standing in the dark hall, at a loss. Later, when Jak and Corbin had returned from their work, stamping their boots and rubbing their hands, he went to bed. It was then, staring at the ceiling, that he recalled what was odd about that candle.

It had not flickered, even when in the window, where drafts and gusts always came through the shutters. The flame had been perfectly steady and still. Even in a light wind, much less a storm, it should have flickered and danced and perhaps even been blown out by the drafts. He fell asleep trying to remember if Telyn's hair had been tousled by drafts that should have affected the candle, but that just got his mind onto the subject of her face, and then it was hard to think at all. Wondering what it all meant, he slipped into troubled dreams.

Chapter Ten

The Battleaxe Folk

Many hours into the night there came a loud hammering at the door. The storm was at its peak. It howled and clawed at the shuttered windows, seeking to slip in cold fingers and pry away the protective boards. Brand, who had been dreaming of owls and strange lights and Telyn's fine face, awoke with a start. Beads of cold perspiration were on his forehead and cheeks. It took him a moment to realize where he was and what had awakened him. Out in the hall he heard the boards creak beneath Jak's feet, then Corbin's heavier tread. The hammering came again, thump, thump, thump. He scrambled out of the bedclothes and pulled on his trousers, shivering in the cold.

Telyn, wearing a nightdress that would have set Brand's heart to pounding if it hadn't been pounding already, was the first to reach the door. She seemed in a terrible hurry, her cheeks were flushed with excitement as she lay her hands on the bar that held the heavy oaken door. Although most folk on the Berrywine River rarely barred their doors, Rabing Isle was close to the northern border of the River Haven and things had not been well this autumn. Jak had decided to bar the door tonight as a precaution.

“Hold it!” Jak shouted as she made ready to throw up the bar and open the door. He extended his hand, palm outward.

Telyn paused with a visible effort of will and stepped to one side. “You set the lamps out,” she said. “You wanted them to come, so why do you hesitate now?”

“Them?” questioned Jak. “I wanted Myrrdin to come, none other.”

Telyn crossed her arms beneath her breasts, looking cold and a bit cross. “Perhaps it is Myrrdin, his beard white with frost and his feet half-frozen in their boots.”

Thump, thump, thump. The door resounded with heavy blows.

Suddenly, Brand felt a bite of concern. Would Myrrdin's fist fall so heavily? It sounded as if a smithy's hammer were being wielded full force upon the door. Despite it's heavy oaken timbers, it shook and rattled with each blow. What kind of man would come to Rabing Isle on such a night?

“Who hammers on my door in the deep of night?” Jak demanded loudly.

Thump, thump, thump. The hammering was the only reply.

Jak scowled, his mood turning dark. Before Brand could caution him, he had thrown up the bar and swung open the door. Corbin raised the lantern he was carrying a bit higher so that all could see into the dark night. The figure that stood outside in the raging blizzard was not what they had expected. It was not tall like Myrrdin or a shadow man, nor as short as one of the Faerie.

It was clearly one of the Battleaxe Folk. Although he stood very tall for one of his race, almost as tall as Telyn, he was built along the lines of all his folk. The head was massive with crude, overlarge features and a heavy beard of coarse, red and gold hair. The arms were long and thick and the legs short and thicker. His powerful barrel-like chest made up the rest of him. Brand was taken aback, he had seen a few wandering traders of fine goods before from the Battleaxe Folk, but never one nearly as large as this. He had to weigh as much as Corbin, at least. Brand's eyes drifted uncontrollably to the heavy, doubled-bladed battleaxe that hung on a leather thong from his wide belt.

Jak crossed his arms and glared at the visitor. “Who disturbs our rest on such a night?”

“I am Modi of the warriors,” answered Modi, haltingly, but clearly. It was obvious that he was not used to their speech.

“I am Jak of the Clan Rabing,” said Jak, frowning less. “What can we do for one of the Battleaxe Folk on a night such as this?”

Modi's lips worked for a moment, his huge brows furrowed in concentration. “Gudrin-she is of the talespinners-she sent me. She saw your light.”

At this, Telyn took a half-step forward. Brand eyed her, thinking of her candle. Surely, Modi meant the light from one of the lamps set out to guide Myrrdin.

“There are more of you? Do you need shelter?” asked Jak.

Relief flooded over Modi's face. “Yes, shelter. There is only I… And the Spinner.”

“Why didn't your companion come up with you?” asked Telyn, slipping herself into the narrow space between Jak's shoulder and the doorjamb. “Is he sick? Too weak to walk?”

Modi eyed her critically for a few moments before answering. He seemed to see something that made him uncertain. “Gudrin is not sick. She is… Burdened. She rests in the boat.”

Donning their boots, cloaks and hats, the four of them followed Modi down to the docks in the swirling blizzard. The path was pitch-blackness streaked with white. The world lost its form only a few feet away in every direction. Only the stones along the path kept them from losing their way. Brand realized that the hurricane lamps would only have been visible from a few yards out on the river. He wondered

if the Battleaxe Folk had keener eyes than did the folk of the River Haven.

Despite his short legs, Modi marched quickly down the hill. The others had to hurry to keep up, except for Telyn, whose light tread barely seemed to sink into the wind-fluffed powder. Brand was surprised to see that the snow had already piled up in drifts two or three feet high in places. Modi plowed through it all as if it was nothing, giving the impression that snow was no more worthy of notice than mist on a fine morning. Likewise, the freezing wind that whipped his weathered cloak of earthen brown wildly about seemed no more to him than a light summer's breeze. The questions that they shouted at his back were snatched away by the wind, and in any case he answered them all with only broad, vague gestures of his long, thick arms.

When they reached the docks they found a small boat there, made of stiff hides sewn together in the fashion of the Battleaxe Folk. In the middle of the leather boat sat a hunched figure wrapped in cloaks. At their approach, the figure stirred, but didn't rise. Telyn skipped forward, jumping down into the boat beside the figure. Modi stumped forward in sudden concern and stood on the dock, watching her and his companion closely. Brand had a sudden feeling that his eyes were less than friendly. He noted that one bulging fist now gripped the haft of his axe.

Brand rushed forward, putting a hand on Modi's huge arm. It felt as if he had grabbed onto a boulder. “There's no need for that, sir,” he said. “She only wishes to help. She is a good healer.”

Modi looked at him as if seeing him for the first time. His eyes were the color of tarnished steel. Then he returned his attention to the two in the boat. His hand remained where it was, as if he, Brand, were not worthy of concern. Brand wondered if he could even slow the warrior down, should he decide to act.

Gudrin rose up and climbed out of the boat. She mounted the dock with deliberate movements that weren't those of someone frail or sick. She stood on the dock between them all. Telyn jumped up and stood at her side. The River Folk all stared at Gudrin, while she eyed each of them in turn. Modi watched the River Folk. His fist was still firmly planted on the haft of his axe, as if rooted there. Feeling a bit foolish, Brand let his hands slip down to his sides. He knew he was a strong man, very strong for his young years, and he could not but wonder how strong Modi was.

“That's enough, Warrior,” said Gudrin. She made a gesture, and Modi reluctantly released his hold on his weapon. “We are clearly among friends.”

Gudrin, unlike Modi, spoke their tongue flawlessly. Also unlike

Modi, she was of normal size for her race, being perhaps four feet in height. The barrel-chested build, long arms and large features were all there, but her hair was dark gray shot through with streaks of white. She wore a black cloak, thigh-high boots and an old wide-brimmed hat of shapeless, colorless material. On her back she carried a heavy rucksack of riveted leather and tucked under her arm was a large package of some kind.

“Greetings, good folk of the River,” she said, her voice booming in the storm. “I am Gudrin of the Talespinners.”

They all nodded politely and introduced themselves. Corbin and Brand moved to help pull the boat up out of the water, so that it would not capsize during the night with the weight of the snow, but Modi waved them off with his large hands. Stumping down into the freezing water, he grabbed ahold of the boat's prow and dragged it up onto the shore single-handed. Lifting up two heavy packs, he unloaded the boat. Then without a word to anyone, he moved back to Gudrin's side, slinging one of the heavy packs over each shoulder.

With Corbin and Brand trailing behind and at a bit of a loss, the party marched back up the hill to the house. When inside they stoked up the fire to a cheery blaze and Corbin worked in the kitchen to feed them something. After his guests had settled and been given steaming mugs of hot spiced tea, Jak asked them if they had caught sight of Myrrdin.

Gudrin looked up sharply at the name. Her eyes narrowed and her lips pursed. She seemed to hold the package under her arm closer to her chest. Her eyes burned into Jak's, and for a moment Jak's face seemed emotionless, frozen. Then Gudrin nodded, as if to herself or someone unseen, and lowered her head. “Yes, yes, we've seen Myrrdin, but not for some time. It is he, in fact, that we've come to find.”

Jak explained why they were on Rabing Isle rather than attending the festivities at Riverton.

“So Myrrdin is not here to maintain the Pact?” asked Gudrin. “That is bad news indeed. I can think of nothing that would delay him from such an important task. Yes, bad news indeed. I believe it is as the signs portend.” She sighed and shook her head. She sipped her spiced tea, while Modi still eyed his mug doubtfully. “Ah, thanks for the refreshment. It has been a long journey.”

“I assume you hail from the North?” asked Jak.

Gudrin nodded, doffing her hat and cloak. “We came to the light,” she said.

“The light?” said Telyn, leaning forward. “How could you see a light in such a storm?”

Gudrin turned to face Telyn, who had been staring at her intently

for some time. “And you, my fair lady,” she said. “Where do you hail from?”

Their eyes locked for a few moments, and then Telyn dropped hers. She opened her mouth to speak, but then closed it again. Brand could not hold his tongue. “She is Telyn of the Fob clan,” he told Gudrin. “She is from Riverton, on Stone Island.”

Gudrin looked at him, and for a moment Brand felt the power in her eyes and knew why the others had been acting strangely. Those eyes were incredibly blue and as deep as the open sea-as wide as the sky on a clear summer's day. There was something there, something he'd never seen before. Gudrin gave him just a flash of her eyes before returning her gaze to Telyn. Brand swallowed in relief when Gudrin's attention shifted.

She eyed Telyn a few moments longer and Telyn, for her part, bravely returned her gaze this time for several seconds before again dropping her eyes. Gudrin pursed her lips and nodded. She tapped the package clamped under her arm. Brand had the sudden impression that it was a large book of some kind, probably wrapped up to protect it from the river and the weather.

“Children shouldn't play with flint and tinder, lest they burn more than tallow and timber,” Gudrin quoted. Brand half remembered the old rhyme from his childhood, but he was at something of a loss to understand its meaning now.

Telyn, however, jumped as if struck. Her hands twined about one another. Brand realized Gudrin suspected Telyn had used magic, and she could be right.

Chapter Eleven

Telyn's Plan

It was then, in the awkward moment of silence that followed, that Brand saw the rucksack on Gudrin's back jump, just a little. It was really more of a twitch, as if something inside had suddenly moved or shifted uneasily. He wondered vaguely if Gudrin had a rabbit in there or some other kind of captured game. Out of politeness for other people's customs, he decided not to mention it.

“I don't understand your meaning, madam, but I do know that I have offered you hospitality and you don't seem overly gracious about it,” said Jak. Brand and Corbin exchanged glances. Brand knew that they were both thinking Jak was perhaps pushing too far. The Battleaxe Folk were known to be honest and just, but often gruff and surly as well.

Gudrin dropped her powerful gaze, and for a moment she looked truly old and burdened. She leaned her head forward, rubbing the back of her neck. She sighed and looked back at them, smiling. It was a very different effect this time; her eyes no longer seemed to bore into one's head. They looked friendly and tired. “I apologize. You are clearly all good folk, you must understand that we are tired and have journeyed far. All the world is not at peace like the River Haven. In fact, very little of it is. We of the Kindred have suspicious natures that should be left at the border, but it is hard to change one's nature so quickly.”

“Yes, I can understand that. It's very late. I think it's time we retired,” said Jak, nodding. His tone indicated that the apology was accepted. “Brand, Corbin, show our guests to their rooms when they're ready.”

And so the lights were doused again, and the two strangers were given rooms in the back of the house with many apologies for the dust and old linen. As Modi mounted the steps, Brand felt sure they would give way under his weight. He now recalculated the warrior's weight to be greater than Corbin's. Considerably greater. On his way back to his own room, he passed by Telyn's room, and noted that the candle she had burned all night was now out. Telyn caught him by the arm as he went by and dragged him in, shutting the door.

“They make me nervous. Don't you feel it? Gudrin has a power, I'm sure of it. That's why she saw my beacon,” said Telyn, speaking very quickly. Before Brand could comment, she snatched the candle he

had been carrying to light his way and took it over to the window. With it she relit the candle in the window. “Well, I'm not going to have some old talespinner scare me out of my plans with a few words.”

“Telyn, are you saying you think they saw your candle?” Brand asked. “How could they have?”

She looked him in the eye. “You saw it last night, even though the shutters were closed,” she said. A far-away look came over her face. “To one of the Kindred, especially a wise one like Gudrin, it must stand out like a brilliant point of light visible for a great distance.”

“But how?” he demanded, knowing the answer, but not wanting to hear it. “How is such a thing possible?”

“Because it is a magical beacon. I've had visions about how to make it-the tallow is not normal tallow, there are many ingredients-but none of that matters now. I-” she came forward and took his hands. “I've got a bit of the power in me, Brand, just a spark. I've known it for a long time, the visions, this beacon, other things…”

Fear came over Brand, a more direct and immediate fear than even the shadow man brought. He felt that he was losing Telyn. How could she ever be his when they reached marrying age if she indeed had some kind of power?

“Telyn, in the River Haven, such things aren't looked upon favorably. Magic is strictly to be kept out of the Haven-for the River's sake girl, that's what the Pact with the Faerie is all about!”

Telyn looked up at him. “I know. That's why I must meet the Faerie.”

This time he reached out to her. He took her hands into his. “No, that's impossible, Telyn. I won't have you following a will-o-wisp or becoming a new trophy for the Wild Hunt.”

Telyn pulled away from him with an irritated gesture. “I'm not suggesting anything so drastic. If I could just learn a few more things from them. They are so wise…”

Brand's mouth felt dry. “Wise yes, but fickle and as full of malice and deceit as kindness and wisdom. No one but those performing the ceremony can even watch them in safety.”

“I could. I could use your help as well. We'll go around behind the faerie mound, to the side where the forest comes close, and then-”

“But we have no wards! We would be at their mercy!” burst out Brand.

She shushed him with her delicate hand. She looked to the door and listened a moment before speaking further. Satisfied that no one had heard his outburst, she lifted her hand from his mouth. “I'm not a fool. I have wards. We will be in no danger.”

Brand sighed aloud, finding it difficult to believe that he was

having this conversation. See the Faerie? This was one of the greatest fears of any sensible person, not something that was planned for and sought out! Truly, this plan of hers topped them all.

“Are you with me, or do I go it alone?” she demanded. She had the cast to her face that Brand knew meant a bout of stubbornness was near at hand. She had a stubborn streak as wide as the slowest part of the river.

“I'll have to tell your mother. I'll tell everyone, I can't let you be led astray,” he said resolutely.

Telyn tilted her head and gave him an amused half-smile. “You think you can stop me? You think you or anyone else in the Haven can even catch me?”

Brand paused for a moment, considering. He sighed and looked dejected. “No, probably not. You'd just disappear into the trees or something…”

“That's right,” she said, walking around him in a slow circle as she spoke. “I would. And then I would face the Faerie alone.”

Brand rolled his eyes, unbelieving of his misfortune. “Okay, I'll come with you.”

Telyn, who was halfway around on her circle jumped up with a happy sound and kissed the back of his neck. This sent a wave of nerves tingling and singing down his back.

After that, she swore him to secrecy and he bid her goodnight. Just as he left, he looked at the candle again. She had placed his beside hers. His candle guttered and danced with the drafts, but hers burned steady and clear. This time there was no doubt of it. Telyn had worked magic.

He went to bed for a second time that night with troubling thoughts. As he fell asleep, he wondered what other things might be attracted to her beacon.

Chapter Twelve

The Shade

By the following morning the blizzard had stopped. The world had changed from green and brown to white and dark gray. Hoarfrost and icicles were already growing from the house's eaves. One particularly long icicle hung down in front of the doorway like a frozen dagger. It broke way and shattered when Brand went out to fill two tin pails at the covered well in the yard. Corbin followed him out to help.

“Well, what do you think of them?” asked Corbin as they wound up the rattling chain. Far down in the echoing depths of the well the bucket sloshed and clattered against the stones.

“I don't like this whole thing,” Brand replied.

“Oh now, let's not be like your brother Jak,” said Corbin. “They are a bit rough in their ways, but I can imagine that Gudrin has many an excellent tale to spin. I've never heard one of their stories first hand, but they're said to be the best. Wouldn't it be quite a feather in our caps if we could present them at the feast tonight?”

“What about Myrrdin?”

Corbin made an expansive gesture. “Perhaps Gudrin could perform the ceremony. She seems as wise as any.”

Brand looked at him quizzically. “Everyone around here seems so taken with outsiders lately.”

“What's wrong?” asked Corbin, squinting at him. Just then the bucket came into view and they hauled it up and filled one of the tin pails. The bucket dropped back down with a long clinking rattle of the chain and a distant, echoing splash.

Brand frowned before answering his cousin. Should he tell Corbin of Telyn's insane plans? She would be angry when she found out, but perhaps he could come up with some way to stop her. Still, he was reluctant to tell Corbin something she had told him in confidence. It was a troubling dilemma, he couldn't recall ever having held something back from Corbin before.

“I don't know,” he said at last. “Nothing seems to be the way it was a few weeks ago.”

They hauled up the bucket a second time, and Brand waited for what Corbin's mind to digest this. He began to fear that somehow Corbin already knew everything. It sometimes seemed as if he knew things that no one else did, simply because he reasoned them through

so carefully and clearly.

“It must be something about Scraper-Telyn, then,” he said slowly, piecing it together. Brand oftentimes thought of Corbin's head as a miller's wheel and stone. He always ground down hard facts into a fine dust. “She was acting oddly last night… Almost as if she expected someone besides Myrrdin. Not a pair of the Kindred, either.”

Brand glanced at him and chewed a bit on his lower lip. He looked away, lest his eyes give away the rest of the puzzle somehow to Corbin's millstone. The bucket rose to the top a second time and they filled the second pail in silence.

“Ah, I have it!” said Corbin triumphantly. “She expected to see the Faerie at the door!”

Brand and Corbin looked at each other. Brand shook his head in defeat. “I was never good at deceit, and you are like a wolf hunting a lost lamb if there is a fact missing in the world.”

Corbin's look of triumph faded quickly, as more ramifications came to him. “But how is such a thing possible? And why would anyone want to meet the Faerie on their doorstep during a midnight blizzard?”

Brand sighed. He explained what little he knew. He cautioned Corbin to secrecy, but knew that there was little hope that Telyn wouldn't figure out that Brand had told him of her schemes. She was almost as good as Corbin at delving into the truth, and Corbin was probably worse than Brand at hiding it.

It was when they were trudging through the new fallen snow back to the house that Corbin dropped his pail of water.

“Corbin, what are you doing, man?” Brand demanded. Then he stopped as he noticed that Corbin was standing stock still, looking out through the opening in the hedge where the path led down into the apple orchard. “What's wrong?”

Corbin backed way to Brand's side. He pointed into the white encrusted trees. “There,” he hissed. “Beyond the fourth row. I saw something moving about.”

They crouched down like hunters, Corbin pointing. To both their ears then came the sweet music of distant pipes. Corbin looked into Brand's eyes, their faces close together, the white plumes of their breath fogging the space between them. Brand knew the truth before his friend spoke.

“It was your shadow man, Brand. I'm sure of it. I feel his spell now, calling us to come and dance.”

The two of them rose up and ran into the house. Behind them the two tin pails spilled their water onto the snow, melting dark patches in the smooth expanse of white.

Brand, always fleeter of foot, won the race to the door and burst

through it. “Jak!” he shouted to his brother. “Get your crossbow!”

Jak, who had been sitting on his favorite chair with his feet hanging over the arms, jumped up in alarm. He spilled the tea that he had been sipping. Modi surprised everyone by producing his battleaxe, which he had placed out of sight behind his chair. He leapt up and charged to the door as if an army was on the island. Brushing Brand and Corbin aside, he pushed shut the door and barred it, putting his broad back against it. Only then did he turn to the boys.

“What did you see?” he demanded, his bass voice ringing with command. He gripped his battleaxe in both hands, at the ready.

“The shadow man,” said Brand, pointing toward the orchard and the dock beyond. “Corbin saw the shadow man who has been following us for some time.”

Modi's eyes narrowed. He went to the shuttered window nearest him and released the latch, peeking outside. White light illuminated his weathered face and hard eyes. “Just one man?”

“Yes, but he is very mysterious,” replied Brand.

“Are you sure it is the same one?” Jak asked them.

Corbin shrugged. “I don't know. This time we heard the music of pipes.”

“Perhaps we should go out and thrash him,” suggested Jak, rolling up his sleeves and donning his cloak and boots.

Corbin shook his head. “He is not a normal man. It was like Brand said, I–I felt a cold dread come over me. Even to look at him was difficult. Perhaps he is one of the Faerie. One of the Dark Ones.”

Modi slammed the shutters and latched them. They all jumped at the noise. “I see nothing. Faerie, you say?” he said, snorting. “What do River Folk know of Dark Ones?”

Before any could answer him, Gudrin and Telyn came into the room. “I'm sorry, but I seem to have slept late,” said Gudrin. Brand was a bit amused to note that although she wore a nightshirt, she still had her package under her arm and her rucksack on her back. Gudrin looked at Modi and sighed. “I see your weapon is ready again, Modi of the warriors. What is all the commotion about?”

Brand quickly explained about the shadow man while Jak finished dressing and went upstairs to get his crossbow. While Brand was describing the shadow man, Gudrin became increasingly concerned.

“And the length of the weapon you saw the first time…”

“I couldn't be sure it was a weapon,” interrupted Brand.

“Yes, yes, but if it was, would you say it was the length of a dagger or a sword?”

Brand pondered for a moment. “In between, perhaps.”

Gudrin nodded, kneading her chin. She held her package to her

chest, as if it gave her comfort of some kind. Brand watched her and noticed that her rucksack gave a tiny twitch again, as it had last night, a small movement. Brand blinked and frowned. He surmised that Gudrin must have some kind of odd tick in the muscles of her back. Perhaps it only showed up when she was thinking, the way old man Tad Silure's cheek would twitch when he spoke before the Riverton council.

"We must investigate this, Modi," Gudrin said to her companion.

Modi shrugged his massive shoulders. "It is but one man."

"They describe not a man, but one of the shirik," said Gudrin.

At this, Modi came alive. He strode forward to Gudrin's side. They spoke briefly in their own tongue, which, to the ears of the River Folk, sounded both crude and subtle. It was a language of many hard sounds and careful inflections. Each word seemed clear and clipped; none ran into the next as words tended to do in their own tongue. Only Telyn seemed to enjoy the sound of it.

"There was one other thing," said Corbin. "We heard the sweet music of pipes after the phantom had disappeared."

Gudrin and Modi exchanged glances. "Man-sized? Bearing a long knife and playing sweet pipes? It can only be Voynod," said Modi.

Gudrin nodded, but gestured Modi to silence. "It is best not to name them so casually when one is near," she said.

Telyn had followed Jak and his crossbow to the door, both now fully dressed for the cold. In her hand she held a long thin dagger. Brand frowned at the look of it.

"Wait," said Gudrin. She raised up a thick-fingered hand. "You must not confront the shirik now. It is weak so far from home, I'm sure, but not so weak as to fall to an honest crossbow bolt or dagger."

"I didn't want to kill the man," said Jak, a bit taken aback. "I just wanted to warn him off."

Gudrin nodded. "It is not a man. It is a shirik — a shade, as you would call it in your tongue. A powerful servant of the Enemy. This one you saw, that Modi has already unwisely named, is the Enemy's bard."

"The Enemy? Do you mean Herla?" asked Brand.

Gudrin raised her hands to her face and made shushing motions. "Shhh! Don't speak his name aloud with one of his servants near!"

All the River Folk stared at her with mouths open. Brand had heard stories of bogies such as the dreaded shades, free agents of Herla and his Wild Hunt, but the idea that there was one of them stalking about outside was just too much.

"Well, that's it," Jak said, throwing up his hands. "That's just grand."

"How do you know?" Brand asked Gudrin, ignoring his brother's

outburst.

"I can feel it. Now that I know it is here, its presence is clear to me," she turned then and leveled an accusatory finger at Telyn. "I believe it was some of your doing that it is here this morning. I warned you about the beacon, but still you saw fit to burn it. There are many things, even here in the Haven, that should not be disturbed by a call from one without the wisdom to deal with them."

Telyn hung her head, but by the set of her jaw and the way she toyed with her dagger, Brand suspected she was not cowed. Gudrin looked at her and sighed. "Still," she said, "it wouldn't be fair to blame you entirely, as the thing has been following these boys of Clan Rabing for some time now, even without your aid in marking them."

"What shall we do?" asked Jak, his voice sounding weak and betraying that he was at a loss as to how to protect his home and his guests.

"We will have breakfast," said Gudrin simply. The only one who smiled at this idea was Corbin.

Posting Modi as a lookout at the front window, they ate around the fire and made plans. While eating, they all felt the presence of something outside, something that wished them ill. Occasionally, they thought to hear the soft playing of sweet pipes, but they were never sure, as it might have been only the wind whistling around the eaves of the old house. The music, if music it was, brought them no joy. There was no laughter in the house, and somehow the food tasted less appetizing, despite Corbin's excellent cooking. They plied Gudrin with questions, most of which she answered vaguely. Some, she refused to answer entirely. Telyn was the most persistent questioner.

"But madam, you must tell us about Herr-ah, that is, about the Enemy. He is just one of the Faerie, is he not?"

"Yes, and no," said Gudrin. She swallowed another two strips of bacon, seemingly whole, before continuing. "The Enemy is one we must not speak of just now. Not if that is one of his servants outside."

She paused for a moment to glance to the closed shutters, her eyes seeming to focus on the snowy scene outside and whatever might lurk there. A tinkling sound came to them all then, a soft half-melody, felt as much as heard. Frowning, Gudrin turned back to the group. She leaned forward and lowered her voice. The others all leaned inward to hear her words.

"The Faerie aren't like humans, merlings or the Kindred. They come in myriad forms, the next one looking and acting completely differently from the last. They do not have families and kinfolk quite the way that we do. A Faerie elfkin is able to sire a dryad or one of the Wee Folk, or even a goblin. What results depends on magic and the nature of the parents. Many of the Faerie seem to be unique examples

of their kind, freaks that are never born twice. Some of them were once human, and are now forever cursed to live with the Faerie, not alive, but Undying."

"Among the unique ones, there are wide varieties of temperaments and tendencies. The Enemy and his servants are unique in this way, many of them once human. They are of a sort that embraces cruelty and the absence of light. It is part of your Pact with the Faerie that they keep away these Dark Ones."

Jak made a gesture of annoyance. "You mentioned merlings in the same breath as River Folk and the Kindred. The Faerie are strange, but at least they keep their bargains. I'd rather not be likened to one of the baby-stealing, muck-crusted merlings."

Gudrin shrugged. "True, they steal your young, but do you not eat their eggs when given the chance? In fact, you inhabit the same lands and waters as the merlings for the same reasons. They to, fear the Faerie and reside in the Haven to avoid their torments."

"You make them sound intelligent," said Jak with a snort. "I've never thought of merlings as much more than dim-witted savages."

"A fair assessment," admitted Gudrin. "But regardless, both your peoples reside here in an uneasy truce, both thankful to be out of the reach of the Faerie."

"But I thought the Pact was only to appease the Faerie, to keep them from stealing from us and playing their awful pranks," said Brand, chewing a brown-bread muffin. He sipped a mug of coffee to wash it down. "You make it seem as if much more is at stake."

Gudrin rolled her eyes to the ceiling. "Oh, how short are the memories of humans. The Pact, which seems almost a new thing to my Kindred, appears to you River Folk as ancient history, the origins of which are only vaguely understood," she said, shaking her head. She drained her coffee mug in a gulp and wagged it at Corbin, who promptly filled it again. "The Pact is really a bargain, my good young man, struck between the Faerie and the River Folk. You see, although their needs are slight, the Faerie aren't farmers. They have always found it easier to steal what food they need than grow it themselves.

"However, the rising of the Enemy in days gone by was the real reason for the Pact. Rather than stealing from and hunting one another, your two peoples decided to cooperate. Your part of the bargain was to give one part in seven of your crops each year to feed the Faerie of Cmyry. For their part the Faerie would perform no tricks, sour no milk, blight no crops and set no changelings in the cribs of your mothers. Also, they had the task of guarding your borders against malicious creatures of every type," Gudrin finished. She scooped up another forkful of scrambled eggs, which quickly disappeared into her face.

Brand noticed that even at the breakfast table she wore her leather sack over her shoulder and kept her package laid across her knees. He was about to ask her about it, but Telyn bubbled up with another question.

“So the Faerie should have kept out this shade?” she asked. There was an odd light in her eyes that spoke of a hunger for knowledge, rather than food. Brand noticed that she had barely touched her plate.

“Aye, they should have,” said Gudrin. “It is a disturbing thing that the Enemy's bard has so much strength as to be able to get past them.” Her plate was empty and she sat back, loosening her belt and readjusting her rucksack for comfort. Brand thought he saw it jiggle oddly when she moved it, as if a heavy object had shifted inside.

“Are we strong enough here, on our home isle, to face this thing and ward it off?” demanded Jak.

Gudrin considered. She picked up the package on her knees, which Brand was now certain was a book, and closed her eyes. After a moment she nodded. “Yes, I feel that we have strength enough if he is alone. The Shade is weak when alone and in the daylight. Especially when working hard to keep the Faerie from noticing him.

“But that isn't the real question,” she said, placing both hands on the table and eyeing each of them in turn. Her blue gaze had that hard spark of light again that was painful to look upon. “The real question is why the Enemy has sent his bard to watch you.”

Chapter Thirteen

Gudrin's Burden

Gudrin aimed a thick finger at Telyn. “I would blame you and your beacon first, were it not for the fact that the shade was seen by Brand even before you lit the fool thing.”

Telyn frowned at her nearly full plate of cold breakfast.

“It matters not why,” said Jak, rising and taking up his crossbow. “You say we can ward it off. Let us do so and be done with it. I'll not have such a creature wandering about my island and creating mischief if I can prevent it.”

Gudrin shook her head. “No,” she said, in the tone of one commanding children. She took another gulp of coffee, then turned her baleful eyes full force onto Jak. Jak stood where he was, his legs and face twitching, but not moving.

Brand felt a heat come up his neck and into his face. He stood up, rising to his full height. He was considerably taller than any of them. “Gudrin of the Talespinners,” he said in a loud voice. Some quiet part of him wondered just what he was doing, but a greater part of him pushed past all doubts and worries. “This is the house of Clan Rabing, on Rabing Isle. My brother is the master of this house, and you have taken of his hearth and food. I demand that you reconsider your words.”

Everyone looked at him in surprise. Telyn smiled. Modi's hand moved to the haft of his axe. Gudrin was the last to react. She stood up too and faced Brand. She clutched her package to her barrel-like chest and her rucksack shifted on her back as though it held poached game. Her eyes cut into Brand's gaze and they locked there. Brand resolutely returned the stare, refusing to look down, although it seemed one of the greatest efforts of his life. Vaguely, he wondered if having suffered through the dreadful gaze of the shade he had seen twice now had somehow strengthened him for this encounter. Through sheer determination he held on, managing not to avert his eyes.

Finally, Gudrin nodded. She dropped her eyes first. She rubbed her face, eyes downcast for several long moments. When she lifted them again, the power in them was all but gone.

“You are right. I have behaved without consideration for my host,” she said then she sighed and took her chair again. The others relaxed as well. Jak came to life again and Modi let go of his axe.

Gudrin suddenly looked older and smaller. “It is just that you do not know what it is that you wish to face. It is a horror beyond description.”

Brand was a bit amazed to find himself standing there, facing down Gudrin. He frowned and sat down slowly. It was not his normal role to play. He shook himself slightly, wondering what had overcome him. Then he knew: he had not been able to stand his brother looking so weak. Jak didn't deserve that.

“Tell us what you can then, and let us decide,” said Jak.

Gudrin looked around at them, then stood and donned her cloak and her wide-brimmed hat. “There is no way to explain such a thing, it must be seen.”

They all followed her out into the cold gray morning. Corbin led them into the orchard to the fourth row where he had spotted the shade. Jak had his crossbow loaded, Telyn carried her knife and Corbin and Brand carried the axes they had chopped wood with the day before. When they neared the spot, Modi stopped them with a gesture and stumped forward. He crouched to examine the snow.

“That's no use, Modi,” said Gudrin, stepping forward and waving the others to follow. “The shade will leave no tracks.”

For once, Modi didn't heed Gudrin. He raised his thick-fingered hand again, signaling her to stop. Scowling, Gudrin obeyed. She grumbled something about the warrior class of the Kindred. Modi moved around the trunk of the tree with care, until at last he halted with a grunt of recognition. He waved the others forward.

“As I said…” began Gudrin, then stopped. “By the dragon's breath!” she breathed. “There are prints!”

The River Folk crowded around and they could all see the tracks too. Just four horse tracks, all alone in the fresh snow, as if a horse had appeared by the apple tree and then vanished. There were no tracks leading to the tree, nor away from it. Nor was there any way that someone could have jumped a horse to that spot through the trees. The white frost on the branches was undisturbed.

Gudrin was rubbing her face. She scowled and clenched her package tightly to her chest. On her back, Brand saw her rucksack lurch not once, but twice, as though something had fallen to one side and then the other, by itself. Gudrin jerked her head in annoyance. “Quiet!” she whispered over her shoulder. Then she caught sight of Brand watching her.

Brand frowned and stepped toward Gudrin. He wanted to know what was in that rucksack once and for all.

“This is very bad,” said Gudrin before he could speak. “The shade is strong enough to take bodily form, even if for just a moment or two.” She shook her head.

“Doesn't that just mean we could hurt it with our weapons?” asked Jak.

“No, I doubt it. I'm not sure even Modi of the warriors here could best one of them,” said Gudrin, her face was a mass of deep lines. She looked older when she worried. “It takes more than ordinary steel to injure a shade.”

“What should we do?” asked Telyn. Gudrin startled a bit, turning around to notice for the first time that she had come up behind her to stand close.

“You are a quiet one, aren't you?” she asked. She waved her hands for everyone's attention. “Jak, we must leave this place. We must flee. I don't know why the Enemy has his shades after you, but that doesn't matter. We must run to a safer place. And after that, we must find Myrrdin. He may know why you are hunted.”

Jak nodded in agreement. “I think we should head for Riverton. The Harvest Moon Feast and the Offering must be performed tonight. If I can't bring them Myrrdin, then you will have to do.”

Gudrin raised her hands in protest. “But I'm not fit to perform the ceremony! I haven't the craft!”

“Neither have we, nor have any of the other folk of the River Haven,” argued Jak.

Gudrin clutched her package and clenched her eyes tightly, as would someone in prayer. Brand saw her rucksack shift twice more. He and Corbin exchanged quizzical glances. He had seen it too.

Finally, Gudrin raised up her head, and all her years seemed to run through her in a shudder. Brand wondered just how old she truly was.

“I will do it,” she said simply.

They gathered their things quickly and went to the dock in a tight, nervous group. All of them felt that they were being watched. When they reached the shore, they discovered that a third boat was there, a small rowboat.

“That's Arlon Thunderfoot's, the hunter from Hamlet,” exclaimed Brand. “What's he doing here?”

“Careful, boy,” said Gudrin, holding back his arm. They all watched as Modi moved forward to peer into the boat. He signaled for them to approach.

Inside the boat they found only one oar. There was frozen blood on it.

“Where's Arlon?” asked Brand, already guessing the grim truth.

“He's merling food, by the look of it,” grunted Modi. He turned to Gudrin. “We must sink what we don't take.”

Gudrin nodded. She turned back to the empty rowboat and the stunned River Folk that had gathered around it. “I grieve with you

all.” She raised up her package above her head in both hands.

“The River gives, and the River takes. In the end, the River knows us all.” she quoted. Then she gestured to Modi, who quickly struck a hole in the bottom of the boat and pushed it out into the flood. The warrior moved to the leather boat that the two of them had come in and scuttled it as well.

“We will all take the skiff,” said Gudrin. “Come.”

Numbly, the four River Folk climbed aboard and cast off. Brand couldn't remember having ever heard of an actual murder before. Certainly, there were accidents along the river now and then, but never an intentional killing. Even though he had not known Arlon all that well, it was difficult to accept that he was dead.

For several minutes they traveled in silence, letting the current sweep them away from Rabing Isle. Brand looked back at it, but somehow, with the recent events and the new mantle of white snow, it didn't look friendly to him. It hardly looked like home at all.

For sometime Gudrin sat on the centerboards, hardly moving.

“Gudrin of the Talespinners?” said Telyn in a soft voice.

Gudrin stirred and looked up at her.

“What is it that you carry on your back?” she asked in a hushed voice.

For a few moments, the river made the only sounds that any of them could hear. The water gurgled as it rushed over rocks near the shore. A bird called in the Deepwood and was answered by another back on Rabing Isle. Brand thought the call was a strange one, perhaps a type of bird that he had never heard before.

Gudrin finally spoke. “It is my burden,” she told Telyn, as if this answered everything.

Chapter Fourteen

King Herla's Story

The River Folk were subdued on the voyage back to Riverton. The sky was gray and the water was the color of shadowed steel; even the skiff seemed less full of life and only drifted south with luffing sails and bobbing prow. Telyn now had eyes and ears only for Gudrin, urging her to tell them a tale of ancient times. Brand smiled, missing her attentions, but knowing that when her curiosity was piqued she could not be distracted. Gudrin at first seemed reluctant, but finally let herself be persuaded after Telyn had pleaded with her for several minutes.

Gudrin opened her package and removed a large book. The book was bound in ancient, scaly leather and had clasps of bright brass or perhaps even gold. She clicked open the clasps and opened the book with slow reverence. Brand could see only that the pages were filled with the odd blocky script of the Kindred. Gudrin flipped through a page or two, muttering to herself. At length she looked up at them, nodding absently.

“So, you wish to know of the Dark Bard, my curious young lady? Not an unreasonable request. However, any tale of the Dark Ones must necessarily begin with the tale of…” glancing about and leaning forward, she all but whispered the name, “Herla.”

Brand noticed Telyn's eyes, which were serious and eager. Gudrin sat back against the boat's rail and made herself comfortable. The River Folk moved about the skiff, settling themselves without thought or urging from Jak in places that would both balance the skiff and allow them to hear the tale over the sounds of wind and water. Modi alone rode in the bow, where he listened without appearing to.

As the tale began, Brand felt a chill wind come down the river against the current. It made the sails luff and flag. He and Corbin moved to lower them and drift with the current.

“Herla was one of the first human kings of Cmry, which is the ancient name for this land,” said Gudrin.

“So he was once human?” asked Jak in surprise. Gudrin halted and glared at the interruption.

“Human indeed and a great man as well. The Teret tells of his fall. Once, many years ago, King Herla met another king who was a pigmy, no bigger than a child. This small creature, so the story goes, was mounted on a large goat. He was gaily attired in a cloak and

pants made of the dappled hide of fawns. He wore no shirt however, and his chest was bare and milk-white."

"Oberon," whispered Telyn. Gudrin paused and glanced at her. Telyn blinked. "Sorry."

"Indeed, Oberon it was, but then he was a young lord. He was more wild and playful in that millennium than he is in this. He introduced himself to Herla as follows: 'I am lord of many kings and princes, an unnumbered and innumerable people, and have been sent, a willing envoy, by them to you… Let us agree, therefore, that I shall attend this wedding, and that you shall attend mine a year later.'

"Sure enough, the elfkin king appeared at Herla's wedding with a huge train of followers, bringing wonderful food and drink for the feast. And a year later, just as he had promised, Herla went to attend the elfkin king's wedding, which was held in a magnificent palace in the depths of a mountain. The only entrance to the palace was by the way of a cave in a high cliff. When the time came to leave, the little king loaded Herla and his companions with gifts. Many delightful and intricate mechanical toys and finely wrought clothing and jewelry did he give the king. Lastly, he gave the king a small bloodhound to carry, strictly instructing him that on no account should any of his company dismount till the dog had leapt from the arms of its bearer.

"When Herla came out of the mountain palace and into the sunlight of his own kingdom his joy was short-lived. He asked news from a shepherd, and he learned that not one year, but many hundreds of years had passed since he had last been there, and he himself was only remembered as a king of ancient times who had vanished into a cliff and had never been seen again.

"The king, who thought he had only stayed for three days, could scarcely sit his horse for amazement. Some of his company, forgetting the elfkin king's orders, dismounted before the dog alighted and instantly fell to dust. Realizing why they had dissolved, the king warned the rest under pain of like death not to touch the earth till the hound had leapt."

Gudrin paused here to light her pipe. To the others, who were now listening closely to her tale, it seemed an infinitely slow and tedious process. At last she had the bowl glowing redly and blew several gusts of blue smoke into the open air. "Alas, from that day to this, the hound has never leapt."

"Never?" asked Brand in surprise.

"Never," repeated Gudrin. "And so through all the long centuries, the king and his mad coursers have wandered on horseback ever since, never alighting, never touching the earth, nor bed, nor even feeling the warmth of a campfire. And-although the curse has held them ageless for centuries, they still need to fill their bellies."

“But what kind of men could stay on horseback for centuries, even if ageless?” asked Jak incredulously.

Gudrin shook her head. “They were men no longer, but cursed, undying creatures. They were ageless, but they weren't changeless. They became darker of spirit and came to prefer the night over the day. As hunters they were soon unequaled. Instead of his crown, Herla came to wear the great antlered stag's head that is now familiar to us.”

“But the worst change was due to the curse. For soon, the huntsmen learned why the bloodhound was so named. At first, it would eat nothing, though they offered it every kind of meat that they could kill from the backs of their cursed steeds. The small hound thinned and sickened, and Herla despaired. He cursed Oberon, and wanted nothing more than to avenge himself upon the trickster. Many times, he pondered alighting upon the earth and ending his torment, but stubbornly he refused. Only the hope of vengeance kept him going.

“So it was very important to him that the hound didn't die. He ordered his coursers to bring him every variety of food imaginable, and it was quite by accident that they first learned the dog would lap at the blood of a stag, served to it in a wooden bowl.

“The hound would drink the blood, but it did not return to health. They fed it stag's blood, but still it sickened, although its decline was much slowed. After a time, Herla came to know the truth in his heart.

“'Find the shepherd with whom we first spoke,' he ordered his coursers. 'Find him and slay him. Bring back his body into the forest that we might empty his blood into this wooden bowl.' Grimly, his coursers did as they were told. When served this bowl the hound relished it and soon grew strong again.

“In this way Herla and his followers learned to feed the hound, and in time it robbed them of the last of their humanity. For men can't take and drink the lives of other men in a perpetual hunt without changing. They became cursed horrors of the night. Worse than the Faerie themselves-than those who had created them.

“Oberon came to regret his trick and his curse. Many times have the paths of Herla and Oberon crossed, and always it has been a grim meeting.”

“And now these horrors have taken an interest in us?” asked Brand in dismay. “Why? Why is the Dark Bard here?”

“That I do not know,” replied Gudrin.

“So the bard is one of Herla's coursers, Talespinner?” asked Corbin thoughtfully, “and if any of the Wild Hunt step down from their mounts they will fall to dust. Perhaps all we need to do is coax them to alight.”

“Ah, a fair assessment, Corbin. But few have managed to get any

of the Wild Hunt to leave the backs of their horses. The bard in particular is tenacious. He too was cursed by the Faerie to live in death, to walk the Earth undying. He too, was once mortal, and lives on through the strength of his vengeful will. He is unusual in that he can be apart from Herla and his hound and still exist."

"Are there other agents like him?" asked Corbin.

"Aye, several, but it would not be good to speak more of them now."

With a ritual of movements, Gudrin quietly closed her book, fastening the clasp and testing it. She then rewrapped the book in the waxed paper package and slid it comfortably under her arm.

The River Folk were quiet, each thinking his or her own thoughts for a time. Telyn was the first to speak. "Herla and his coursers are nightmares. But the Faerie, they seem at once wonderful and terrible."

"They are," said Gudrin, speaking as one would from experience. "They are both joyful and sad, young and ancient. It is beyond mortals to truly understand them."

"It would seem," said Corbin thoughtfully. "That our judgment of their actions should be based upon whether or not they benefit us."

"This is one way to view them," Gudrin admitted with a shrug.

"What about the Dark Bard? How did Herla meet him and enlist his aid?" asked Telyn.

"I want to know more of the merlings," Jak interrupted, sounding disturbed. "How do they live? Where did they come from?"

"What interests me is the nature of these shades that were once human and seem to have taken an interest in us River Folk. You must tell us more about them," said Brand.

Gudrin held up her hand. "Those are all other stories, which I will tell you some other time. Now we grow close to Stone Island, if I'm not mistaken."

To the surprise of the River Folk, she was right. They rounded a bend in the great Berrywine river and the granite walls of Stone Island hove into view. Soon they busied themselves with the approach to the harbor.

This time, since the feast of the Harvest Moon was to be held tonight, there was no space at the public docks. They were forced to beach the skiff and drag it ashore and tie it to a gnarled old pine tree so that it wouldn't drift away. All of them came splashing ashore, carrying their packs and the weapons they had brought with them. Brand felt rather silly carrying his woodaxe. He exchanged glances with Corbin and could tell that he felt the same.

"Perhaps we should leave these in the boat," suggested Brand, lifting the axe to Jak. Before his brother could reply, however, Modi stepped close to Brand and laid one of his thick hands on Brand's arm.

“Keep it with you.”

Brand looked at the warrior's huge face. He could find no mockery there, nor any humor of any kind. All he could do was nod.

They all marched up the lane to Riverton under the watchful eyes of those Hoots and Silures that were not away working. For the most part, they were elderly men and women, beating half-heartedly at filthy rugs, or more likely, rocking in their rocking chairs and sucking on cheap clay pipes. The stares were more than unfriendly, they were shocked and downright distrustful. Brand could all but hear their thoughts: Now those Rabing boys are consorting with Fobs and Outsiders! Even Battleaxe Folk, no less! They should change their names from Rabing to Rabble! Huh!

Chapter Fifteen

Old Man Thilfox

It was a long walk uphill, but soon they came to the main cobbled street of Riverton. They halted at the Spotted Hog where they had had lunch just the day before. It seemed like a week had passed since then to Brand.

“We must find Uncle Tylag and Constable Hirck and tell him about the stolen boat and Arlon's disappearance,” said Jak.

“Yes,” agreed Brand, “Uncle Tylag used to be the chief of the Riverton Constabulary, he'll know what to do.”

After a short discussion, they decided that Jak, Modi and Gudrin would report to the constable, while Brand and Corbin would find Tylag. As Brand had no doubt she would, Telyn wished to accompany the talespinner. They all agreed to meet up at the common, where most of the town would be in any case.

“Don't forget about our business, Brand,” Telyn hissed to him as the two groups parted. She looked Corbin up and down critically. “You can come along as well, since I can see that you've wheedled the story out of Brand.”

Brand and Corbin exchanged grins as they went into the Spotted Hog, deciding to check there first. Inside, one thing led to another, and Corbin was soon ordering a large quantity of food for lunch. Brand rolled his eyes, but didn't refuse the plate of smoked fish and fresh bread placed before him.

“She knew immediately,” Corbin said when he'd finished stuffing his lunch away.

“Of course,” replied Brand. “I never doubted that she would.”

“I think I know what you see in that girl.”

“And what would that be?”

“The fact that she can see right through you. It's enough to intrigue any thinking man.”

Brand kept his opinions about Telyn to himself and finished his plate quickly. He noted that a fire was going now in the stone hearth at the back wall of the common room. Winter was upon them early this year. He knew from years of experience that Innkeeper Blunner would keep the flames going all day, everyday, until spring.

“Well,” said Corbin after he'd finished a mug of warm mead. “I think it's clear that my father isn't here.”

Brand agreed, grinning, and the two of them settled their

accounts and stepped out into the street again. The snow had melted off by now, and the sun was even shining weakly. It was good to walk on cobblestones instead of slush and mud.

All of Riverton was bustling in anticipation of tonight's feast. A Mari Lwyd parade came up behind them, bells jangling and criers bawling for all to beware. Remembering when it had been their year to carry the Mari Lwyd, they stepped out of the way into the entryway of Yudo the Tinsmith's shop and watched the procession.

First came the criers, girls all, wearing white dresses with wings made of sticks and gauze. Then came the smaller boys, hopping and leaping with agility, each wearing a top hat and a waistcoat of bright green, yellow or crimson and swinging their canes at the crowds with mock ferocity. Next came the huntsmen themselves, boys and girls nearly as old as Brand and Corbin. First came the biggest of the boys, bearing the Mari Lwyd itself, the ancient symbol of Herla, which consisted of a horse's skull draped with white cloth and decorated with rosettes and colored ribbons. The eyes were of bottle-glass and the antlers were those of a stag killed long ago in the Deepwood. Behind this boy came the other coursers, riding mock horses of white or black.

Brand watched the procession go by, and for the first time felt some of the old excitement of the Harvest Moon feast run through him. “The children think it's all a game, but there they are, imitating Herla at the head of the Wild Hunt. But perhaps I shouldn't mention that name aloud…”

“I remember our year,” said Corbin in a thoughtful voice. “You bore the Mari Lwyd because of your great height, and I was one of your coursers.”

“To think that tonight we may catch sight of what we were playing at just a few years ago,” said Brand. “The whole idea is mad. We must try to stop Telyn. I have no interest in being chased down by Herla and skinned to make new boots and cloaks for his coursers, if the tales are to be believed.”

Corbin looked doubtful. “I don't want to meet up with this Enemy either, but Telyn is not easily dissuaded from anything.”

Brand made a gesture of exasperation. “She wants to do something crazy, possibly risking all our lives or even more. We are well within our rights to stop her. She doesn't know what she is toying with. After listening to Gudrin today and seeing Arlon's boat and those bizarre footprints on the isle, I'm beginning to realize how important all of this is.”

“It's far more than a child's game,” agreed Corbin.

The two of them followed the procession to the gates of Drake manor. The high stone walls were scaled by green tongues of ivy.

They passed between the rusted gates and crunched up the gravel walkway to the steps. As they approached the manor itself, both of them slowed somewhat. It was difficult to overcome their childhood fear and reverence of the place. It was here that the Drake Clan had built their homestead to house their many relations. Riverton had been built up around this one corner of the estate, which made up a goodly portion of Stone Island. The Drake lands stretched all the way to the western cliffs along the far shore of the island. To the north, the estate bordered the town common upon which the festival would be held and upon which the Offering would be made tonight. The manor house itself was an impressive thing, four stories high and rambling, with dozens of apartments big enough for whole families to live in. In fact, more than twenty families of the Drake clan still lived in the manor.

Brand hadn't faced the Riverton Council since he was a child. He hesitated at the foot of the steps, then plunged ahead, swinging the knocker and sending an echoing clatter through the halls on the other side. After a lengthy wait Brand made ready to lift the knocker again. The door swung open even as he reached out his hand. He snatched it back hastily.

The man who answered the door was an elderly fellow with bushy white eyebrows and a squint. He took one look at them and waved them away. “You’ve come for courting early, eh? Anyone you boys would be looking for has already left for the common,” he said. He made as if to shut the door, but then leaned out to have one more word. “And watch that you don't make free with the young ladies of the Drake clan tonight, gentlemen.”

“Sir, excuse me,” said Brand, stepping forward. “We are looking for Tylag of Clan Rabing, sir.”

“Eh, what's this?” asked the man. “Tylag?”

“Yes sir, he sent us to look for Myrrdin.”

“Myrrdin?” asked the man in surprise. His eyes slid back and forth between the two boys and then narrowed suddenly. “Is this a joke? We don't take well to jokes here. I'll have you whipped off the estate!”

“No sir,” said Brand, taking a step back in surprise. “We aren't joking.”

The man squinted at Brand closely. “You're Jan's boy. Jan Rabing's boy. Only Jan could have had a son so tall.”

“You knew my father?”

“Of course,” he snapped. Then he eyed Corbin. “And this great lout must be Corbin Rabing. Well, well.”

“Is Tylag here, sir?” asked Corbin.

The man made an impatient gesture. “Of course,” he said. He

turned and walked away quickly. A crooked finger over his shoulder was the only hint they had that they were to follow. They stepped into the entry hall and shut the door behind them. The hall was everything that Brand had remembered, but perhaps with an extra layer of dust on it. The mosaic floor was a spiral pattern of black and white that gave one the impression of falling into a whirlpool if you stared at it too long. The grand staircase that swept down into the hall from the second story was of carven stone and heavy oak beams. It was up these steps that the old man currently disappeared.

Hustling after him, the boys took the steps two at a time. In the sudden presence of wealth, they were now hotly aware of their simple clothes and muddy boots. Brand began to self-consciously stuff his shirt into his pants.

They reached the top of the steps and for a moment thought they had lost their guide. “There!” said Corbin, pointing to a door that was just swinging shut at the end of the nearest hallway. Brand marched for the door down a hall of dark stained wood. Painted tapestries of various heroic acts performed by Drake clan leaders lined the walls of the dark hall. Brand grabbed hold of the door handle and twisted. They tumbled into the room beyond.

They blinked in unexpected brilliance. The entire back wall of this room and much of the ceiling was made up of stained glass. Brand stood in wonder, recalling the colored lights of the council chamber from when he was a boy. The floor was carpeted with several huge silver wolf pelts taken from the Deepwood. An oval table of great size sat in the middle of the room with twenty-one chairs arranged around it, one for each of the clan leaders.

There were only five people in the room now: Tylag, the man who had answered the door, Gram Rabing, old man Tad Silure and Irva Hoot. Brand could tell that they weren't getting along.

“Sorry about the delay, gentlemen,” said the man who had let them in. “These louts of yours, Tylag, seem to have returned early-and without Myrrdin.”

“Well, it was a long shot, Thilfox,” sighed Tylag.

“Thilfox?” asked Brand, stepping forward. “You're Thilfox Drake?”

The old man made an impatient gesture. “Of course, boy.”

“I apologize, sir. I didn't…” Brand began, but the others were all talking, ignoring them. They were trying to decide who should perform the ceremony of the Offering. Old man Tad Silure and Gram Rabing seemed particularly bitter, while Irva Hoot looked bored.

Brand stepped forward, but Corbin took his arm. “Perhaps we should just go.”

“No, we must tell them about the Kindred and about Arlon.”

“Eh? What was that?” demanded Thilfox suddenly. He rose up and approached them. “Did you say something about the Kindred, meaning the Battleaxe Folk? What would you boys know of such wanderers?”

Brand was a bit taken aback. Thilfox seemed at times deaf and at other times possessed of the keenest hearing. “I–I would like to tell you that we have brought with us Gudrin of the Talespinners and Modi of the Warriors. Gudrin has much craft and lore, I believe she may be well qualified to perform the Offering.”

“Oh you do, do you, boy?” asked old man Tad Silure, rising to his feet. He was a balding man of exceptional age and vitality. He had a habit of smiling and sneering at the same time, which revealed his long yellow teeth. “Who are you to make the council's decisions for them? Like everyone in your clan, you think you own the River itself.”

“Why don't we all control ourselves and hear what they have to say, Tad,” suggested Tylag, checking his own anger with an obvious effort.

“Yes boy, make your report,” said Irva Hoot. She adjusted her clay pipe so that it poked from the opposite side of her mouth and peered at them dubiously.

Brand explained at length what had happened to them for the last couple of days, including the encounters with the shade, the Battleaxe Folk and Arlon's boat. He left out any mention of Telyn's odd candle, or her plans for this evening. When he was finished, Thilfox eyed him oddly.

“That's all you wish to say, Brand?” asked Thilfox.

Brand looked down. “That's all, sir.”

Chapter Sixteen

The Festival

"Then we will discuss this shade at greater length tomorrow," said Thilfox, turning away from the Brand. "Tonight, all that matters is that the Pact is maintained."

The clan leaders began to debate the issue heatedly. Only Gram Rabing stepped over to the boys and asked them a few questions about Jak and how they were faring out on the Isle alone. She tipped her head back toward the others. "They will come up for air shortly. In the meantime, why don't you boys go find these friends of yours?"

"Why are they fighting so fiercely, Gram?" asked Brand.

"None of them want to perform the ceremony, but neither are any of them willing to entrust another. That's why Myrrdin was so helpful. He was always a neutral party. Now, why don't you boys move along. There isn't a lot of time left before the ceremony. Be back by twilight. By then they will be desperate to get anyone to do it."

They turned to go, and found Thilfox holding the door open for them. As he let them out, he gave the boys a rare thin-lipped smile. "You did well to bring back the Talespinner. If she is as you say, it might just save the Pact. Now don't dawdle! Flirt with the girls only sparingly!"

Shaking their heads, Brand and Corbin trotted down the gravel path to the street and turned toward the town common. The snow had almost all melted away, except for certain white mounds beneath trees and sheltered by boulders. On the common the celebration was in full swing beneath the great domed tents and out on the playing fields. Children laughed and capered in circles, making faerie rings of their own in the icy grass. Young girls, wearing multi-hued dresses and mock wings of gauze chased one another in the wooded area. Vendors hawked sweetmeats and rainbow-sticks, which bore ribbons of every color that would flutter in the wind or when a child ran with it held aloft. Wheelbarrows loaded with cider and gingerbeer moved through the crowds, making frequent sales.

"Too bad we are on such an urgent mission," said Corbin regretfully.

Brand agreed. The two of them searched through the crowds. Brand wondered if the mood of the people would have changed if they knew that it still had not been decided who was going to make this year's Offering.

After they had searched for several minutes, Brand felt a tap on his back. He whirled to find Telyn smiling up at him. “You never do look back, do you?” she asked.

“Telyn! It's good that you found us. The council wants to see Gudrin right away.”

Telyn led them to the second great dome tent, where the livestock for the Offering were kept. There they found Jak, Gudrin and Modi. Modi had already downed several mugs of ale and wasn't pleased to have to leave the festival. Gudrin quieted his complaints with a gesture.

Sometime later they all arrived at the door of Drake manor. This time Modi did the knocking. The door was flung open almost immediately. Thilfox ushered them all in and up to the council chambers.

Irva Hoot and old man Tad Silure were the most reluctant to accept Gudrin as a genuine authority. They seemed to think that the Rabing clan had brought her in to upstage them somehow. Tylag quickly grew exasperated.

“Here, here,” said Gudrin finally, holding up her hand. Her voice was such that it carried to the limits of the chamber and brought quiet with the power of its volume. “I will tell you a bit of what I know of your Pact. Recall that for the Kindred, only a handful of generations have passed since the Pact was made. Our memories are therefore fresher.”

With the same careful ritual that she had performed this morning, Gudrin unwrapped her leather-bound book. The clan leaders craned their necks to see what was written on the page, although Brand doubted that any of them could read the odd, blocky script of the Kindred. “To tell the story of the Pact, it is first necessary to know that it was Myrrdin who forged it.”

Thilfox made an impatient gesture. “We know this, spinner. Pray continue.”

Gudrin gave him a baleful stare before going on. Thilfox recoiled visibly. Gudrin then turned her attention to her book, thumbing through the pages and muttering. Finally, she closed it and let it rest in her lap.

She began to speak and while her lips moved, so did her eyes. She caught each of theirs in turn and locked stares for a moment. Even though he was ready for it, Brand sucked in his breath when he met Gudrin's watery blue eyes. They all fell silent and listened to the Talespinner as if mesmerized.

Chapter Seventeen

Myrrdin's Tale

When Myrrdin was yet young, he lived with the Faerie. As many have claimed, he indeed has much Faerie blood in his veins. Some say that his mother was a human princess exchanged for a changeling at birth, others that his father was an elf of almost human stature. All this aside, there is no doubt that Myrrdin is a man of rare talents.

In his early life, he was raised by the Faerie themselves. He lived in their wondrous lands, which as all know can be found by mortals only at twilight or midnight, and only at the foot of a rainbow or widdershuns nine turns 'round an enchanted fairy mound. In this place, Myrrdin grew wise and tricksy, and though he was not ageless, age took a great while to catch him.

It was on his hundredth birthday or so that manhood finally began to take him. He began to know the females among the Faerie then, in their mryiad forms. He was quite popular among them, as his true youth and semi-mortal life were refreshing and innocent to the ancient ones. He knew enough to avoid those that would kill with their embraces-as I said, he had grown wise in their tutelage. The lovely green-complected mermaids of the sea and the elusive dryads of the forests were his favorites.

It was on a day like many others that Oberon came to find him. Myrrdin had been chasing a fleet-footed dryad with exquisite brown eyes like burning knotholes through a forest of hazel trees. Oberon appeared to be only a boy of twelve summers or so, but Myrrdin knew him to be much older. He was in fact, a lord among the Fair Folk, and Myrrdin's benefactor.

“What service can I perform for you, my lord?” Myrrdin asked respectfully. With some regret, he gave over chasing the dryad. He stood nonchalantly as always when facing one of the powerful ones. His muscles sang like the taunt wires of his fiddle, but he hid his tension by leaning against a tree trunk. His eyes he let fall to the ground, that he would not meet Oberon's sparkling, terrible gaze.

“It is time, I think, to expand your knowledge of men, my adopted son,” Oberon said, “I wish you to follow me.”

“Myrrdin did as he was told and though he was long of limb and fleet of foot, he was soon winded and panting as he chased Oberon through the endless forests. After a time they came to a wall of black rock that had no seam or opening, but somehow Oberon made one

with the touch of his hand. They stepped through and Myrrdin, for the first time in his memory, found himself in the world of men and the Kindred. He stood, in fact, in an open field of grasses, not far from here, where an ancient human lord's barrow had formed a fairy mound. The time was twilight, when the sun touches the sea and turns the sky red. This last was a shock to Myrrdin, for in the lands of the Faerie, it is ever brightest day or blackest night, with no in-between.

“How is this possible, my lord?” he asked. “The sun bleeds red like a dying creature.”

“There are many things of wonder here,” answered Oberon, who led him further toward a nearby farm. There, working in the fields, they found two maidens wearing woolen skirts and hats of woven straw. Such was the softness of their approach that they were very near the maidens before they were noticed. One took fright, dropping her hoe and running home, but her sister stood frozen, having met Oberon's gaze.

Then, in the way of the Faerie, Oberon enticed her to dance with him. Myrrdin too, he begged to dance. Which Myrrdin did, but with some reluctance, as he had never danced before with a mortal. She was one who was not to be feared, but rather was at his mercy. They both danced with the maiden, Oberon playing pipes and Myrrdin playing his fiddle, and in time Oberon did lead them back to the fairy mound. There, in the last dying gleams of light, they made sweet music and danced upon the mound and around it in a circle with many others of the Faerie, who had come forth to join in. Winged sprites, flaming bright, danced alongside those with hooves and those with the faces of white-skinned children and even the pointed-eared goblins.

When these last came near the girl, Myrrdin saw fit to intercede, placing his dancing form between the twisted flesh of goblin and fair face of the girl. He knew all too well that evil things delighted these weakest of the Dark Ones and he did not trust them. As he was part mortal and therefore not tireless, he began to weary as the dance went on and on in the darkness with the same wild intensity that it had began. Even as he felt the first pangs of fatigue, it was clear that the girl was exhausted. Still, she danced on. She knew nothing but the wild thrall of the dance, and her body twisted and twirled with the frenzied energy of one overcome.

Eventually, she fell to the earth, and then Oberon, who had been touching her lightly smiled down at her. At last, Myrrdin could take no more. He dropped his fiddle and dared to reach out a long arm, pushing back his lord.

Oberon turned his gaze upon him, and this time Myrrdin met it, although the effort was painful to him. “Are you Faerie, or mortal,

manling?" demanded Oberon, enraged at being touched.

"I am both, and neither," said Myrrdin. "To see the Faerie as a mortal is a thing apart from seeing a mortal from the eyes of the Faerie. It is not in me to prey upon weakness and innocence."

"It is I then who have taken in a changeling and treated it as my born son!" cried Oberon. His arms he raised up, holding aloft the Blue Jewel known as Lavatis. He wielded Lavatis, calling to the rainbow for the power to strike down his adopted son.

Such was his greatness that even in the absence of light and rain the rainbow did march from across the seas and lands to do his bidding.

Myrrdin took these moments to grab up the fallen maiden and run with her toward the farmhouse. Before he reached the door, a savage rainstorm brewed up and lightning chased the rains and came crashing to the earth. At the door the farmer who was the girl's father came to his hammering. But instead of joy, he was met only with despair: The girl was already dead, her heart exploded within her chest like a horse ridden to death by a drunken lord.

Myrrdin looked down at the maiden's dark wet ropes of hair and bloodless white limbs without comprehension. He knew less of death than the maiden had known of the Faerie. He and the farmer regarded one another.

Myrrdin, soaked and cradling a dead girl, learned much of what it was to be mortal that night. He gave over the farmer's daughter with what grace he could, and then ran into the storm and into a new world that he little understood.

His childhood and upbringing at the hands of the Faerie were at an abrupt end. Never again would he call Oberon his sire, and never again would any of the Faerie call him kin.

Chapter Eighteen

Interruption

At this point, Thilfox loudly cleared his throat. Gudrin swept her gaze over to him, but Thilfox kept his eyes focused on his pipe as he said, “Your tale adds detail and color to what legends we've heard whispered before, but now I would like to move on, as time is pressing-”

“It's not time that will press you all this eve!” roared back Gudrin, face blazing. She held out her ancient book and clapped her hands upon it. “Ever are the biggest fools among us the most impatient to get on with things!”

“A fool, am I?” huffed Thilfox, rising to his feet. “I'll not be-”

Gudrin threw up her arms, imploring both him and the heavens. “I spoke tactlessly. Please, seat yourself and allow me to finish my tale. I promise you will not regret it.”

With ill grace, Thilfox flumped back into his chair. Scowling at the spinner, he made a broad gesture, indicating that she should continue.

“Myrrdin,” began Gudrin anew, “after he had left the lands of the Faerie, didn't immediately join the River Folk, although he resembled them more than any of the other races of Cmyru. He wandered for many years instead, and came to join the Kindred, befriending many of our lords who dwelt beneath the mountains and upon them. There are many tales to be told of these times-but not this eve.

“Those years were an unfortunate time for humans, as their numbers had been greatly reduced by wars among themselves and with the Faerie-and even, though I loathe to say it, with the Kindred.”

Here, Modi gave a low growl in the back of his throat. All eyes swung to him, and inevitably to his axe. Brand knew that it was from these times that the Kindred had come to be known to the River Folk as the Battleaxe Folk.

Gudrin ignored the interruption and continued with her tale.

Chapter Nineteen

The Pact

The great kings of the past fell, one by one, and in time there were no more true kingdoms of humanity. Feeling beholden to humans, Myrrdin took it upon himself to walk among them and learn what could be done. He learned that your people were both delightful and wicked, innocent and cunning, silly and wise. He came to love you for your short lives and varied temperaments. Living among the elder races he had found less spice to life. But with your people, each few years brought another fresh generation, eager to learn of the world, to conquer it and to be conquered by it.

But even though the humans had ended their conflict with Kindred, the Faerie continued to plague them. The same sort of idle wickedness that Myrrdin had first witnessed with Oberon still occurred, and worse things had begun as well.

It was rumored that one of the Dark Ones had gained a Jewel. Herla-I have spoken his name too many times this night-had found one of the Jewels of power, although none knew the color and name of the Jewel. Clearly, it was known that he wielded it for with evil intent. Leading the Wild Hunt upon a mad course, he ravaged the remaining human lands with impunity. They hunted humans like animals, taking their skins and skulls as trophies and making adornments from them.

It was in this situation that Myrrdin rediscovered the humans of Cmyru. It took him but a short time to realize that if no one acted, there would possibly be no humans left alive in this part of the world. He took it upon himself to mount a campaign against the Enemy. Marshaling a small army of men and Kindred, he marched through the Low Marshes, over the Border Downs and into the Black Mountains, where the Wild Hunt was often seen.

But ever Herla and his coursers evaded him. They would march after their quarry through forests and over mountains and into deep ravines, only to see them rise up into the sky and vanish. For years they chased the Wild Hunt, until the human and Kindred army, hungry and desperate, riddled with foul curses from the Faerie, was set upon and decimated in the quiet depths of the Deepwood.

Myrrdin and a handful of others escaped. They came after many trials to the shores of the Berrywine, which was then known as the Great Erm, and crossed the flood to stagger onto the rocky beaches of

Stone Island.

A widow of one of Myrrdin's soldiers took him in and nursed him back to health. When he had his strength back and was ready to leave, he took note of the babe that lay in its cradle near the warm fire.

“Is this your child, Tabitha?” he asked the widow.

“Why yes,” she told him. “He is last of my sons yet to live. He is always hungry and never satisfied. He has never left the cradle all these years, never yet spoken a word or taken a step. Hope is all I have for him.”

Myrrdin eyed the fat infant in its cradle, and it did regard him with a flat stare of dislike. “No normal child stays to its crib for more than a decade,” he said, tugging at his beard, which had grown overlong in the mountains and the forests. Despite the widow's worried protests, he gathered a fresh egg and blew out the contents, filling the shell with malt and hops. It was the first step of exorcism, of course, and watching him do it, the widow’s tears flowed freely. Once the egg was ready, he began to brew over the fire.

At this a laugh bubbled up from the cradle. “I am old, old, as old as the night and the moon,” said the changeling, “but never has anyone brewed me a draught of beer in an egg before!” Then it gave a terrible scream, for Myrrdin had taken after it with his walking stick. Around and around the cottage it ran, as fleet-footed as any spring hare, that which had never left its cradle for so many long years!

Myrrdin chased it out into the yard, and finally down into the river itself. There it vanished, and Myrrdin cast about, hoping that the widow's son would appear, as is sometimes the case with changelings when they are discovered.

But there was only the lapping water and the sound of the wind in the pines. The widow's true son never returned. She sat upon the rock where the changeling had vanished and cried aloud with grief. Feeling for her, Myrrdin vowed that the Dark Ones among the Faerie would not continue with their wicked amusements.

For long months, as spring shifted into summer, he wandered the land, deep in thought. One night, he found a farmhouse where a woman had set out milk for a cat. He thought to hear the cat, growling and spitting in the yard. He watched from the road and saw one of the Wee Folk, all dressed in waistcoat and top hat, as was their way, vying with the cat for its milk.

A dark rage filled Myrrdin at even so slight an offense, and he moved to charge and drive off the intruder. Only at the last moment did he check himself, deciding to watch the Wee one instead. After a goodly bit of stick waving and hopping about, the tiny Faerie drove off the cat and ate his fill of the sweet milk. When finally he had scampered away, wiping his tiny mouth and beard, Myrrdin watched

the spot where he had vanished for a long time.

The next night, he told the farmer to turn out the lights again and had them set out two bowls of milk. The Wee one returned, as he had hoped it would. On the third night two of them appeared, one in crimson and one in green. They fought over the milk for a time, until finally deciding to share it. After that, Myrrdin set out more goods. More Wee ones appeared, and each night he set out even more food. He asked the whole village to help, and they did so, because they were indebted to him for his help in the past. Fresh bread, melons, sweet yellow corn, roast fowl and salted venison heaped upon platters in the moonlight.

On the tenth night, he moved the offering out into the yard, instead of upon the porch. On the twentieth, he placed it in the forest outside, each night moving it further away, into the woods and toward the clearing where the nearest faerie mound was to be found.

As the nights went on, autumn grew stronger, the leaves fell and the air held a hint of the snows to come. Each night he made the offering larger, using his powers and the efforts of the last of his faithful soldiers to aid him. Many of the Battleaxe Folk were among his soldiers. Each night the offering attracted more of the Faerie, including ones of greater power and wisdom. Soon the air shone with the fiery light of sprites and the pale glow of the elves.

On the twenty-ninth night, he placed the offering upon the faerie mound itself, and that night Oberon himself came. From concealment Myrrdin and his soldiers watched the phantom feast. Each of the men and the Kindred, save Myrrdin who was immune, had plugged their ears with beeswax so that they couldn't hear the luring pipes of the Faerie and be enticed to join the dancing ring. Still, it took great efforts of will for them all to keep from coming out into the glade, such was the allure and beauty of the Faerie, even without their sweet music. Heavy smells of spices and wines filled their heads. Shimmering images of fantastic beauty assaulted their eyes. To their great credit, none of them broke. The weak among them had already perished long ago facing the Wild Hunt in the Deepwood.

On the thirtieth night, the feast was repeated. Oberon came again, and all his retinue were on hand. But the food was not. Instead, it was placed at the edge of the forest where Myrrdin and his company waited. When the Faerie approached, the mortals stepped forward and placed themselves before the food.

“What trick is this?” laughed Oberon, bounding forward and halting before Myrrdin with his hands on his hips. He cocked his head and recognized Myrrdin in an instant. “Why do you trouble me again, my changeling?”

“We have fed your people for many nights now,” said Myrrdin,

his voice carrying not just to Oberon, but to the others, who were eyeing the food with hunger. “We have been free with our gifts, but now we ask a boon.”

Oberon shouted with laughter and danced away, playing his pipes. “Bring the food to the mound that we all may feast!” he said, speaking to Myrrdin's soldiers. None moved, as they could not hear him nor his magical music. Oberon soon stopped playing and appeared annoyed. He then ushered forth the dryads and the nymphs, hoping to lure them with the bright, unearthly beauties. Myrrdin's company were all veterans of such things, but still they were hard put. They averted their eyes or squeezed them shut. Some chewed at their tongues or stabbed their own hands with their daggers until they bled freely upon the grass of the glade. They moaned aloud and fell to their knees, but none stepped forward.

Again Oberon displayed annoyance. “You hold rein over your mortals well, changeling. It is to your credit. However, it's not our custom to pay for our needs,” he told Myrrdin. “We will take that which we require.”

Oberon ordered forward a wave of goblins and elves with their tiny magic bows. Myrrdin and his company fell back to the woods, without fighting.

With a cry of delight, Oberon was the first to up-end a cask of wine and drink from it. In an instant, he cast the cask aside and screamed in rage. “Vinegar!” he cried. All around him, there were similar cries of dismay among the elves and the other Wee Folk as they bit into rotten fruit and tasted of spoiled milk and maggot-filled meats.

Into this scene, Myrrdin stepped forward once again.

“I should have hunted you down and struck you dead the first time you ran from me!” raged Oberon. He held aloft Lavatis and the Jewel released a brilliant blue radiance which none could look into. “I will summon the rainbow and destroy you all!”

“Then you will have no more feasts, my lord,” pointed out Myrrdin.

“Then so be it!” cried Oberon.

Myrrdin sighed, he had hoped it would not come to this. “Then I have no choice but to check you with Vaul,” he said, producing the Green Jewel of power and holding it aloft. It exuded its own bath of green light, which conflicted with Lavatis and together the Jewels cast a rich eldritch brilliance the blue-green color of the sea. Myrrdin's company and Oberon's retinue both retreated in dismay, shielding their faces from the awful twin glares of raw power.

For once, Oberon was truly at a loss. “How?” he demanded.

Myrrdin shrugged. “In the Deepwood, I was driven into the

underworld by Herla. Many of my comrades perished, but we did rediscover this lost power," he said bravely. Inside, he was nowhere near so calm, as he had only begun to understand the workings of the Jewel. It was all he could do to command Vaul to cast a brilliant glow. He had hoped to keep the Jewel secret from those of power for some years so that he might master it fully.

Oberon had lost his rage, and now had turned thoughtful. The rainbow he had summoned now marched up behind him to stand upon great shimmering legs. It was a terrible sight for mortal eyes, and some perished quietly in the forest that night from sheer fright. "I am certain that I have a better mastery of Lavatis than you do of Vaul. Perhaps it is best that I destroy you now and so become master of two colors.'"

Myrrdin shrugged again. "It is all one to me. Many times tonight I have surprised you. One more time will be enough, should you require it. But…"

"Of what do you think to speak?"

"It does seem to me a big risk to take over a simple matter of food. We will provide for you and yours, but we ask a boon."

"Speak!" commanded Oberon. "What do you ask?"

"Each year, at the end of harvest, we will give you one part in seven of our goods, which is enough to feed you all. We will make this Offering on the night of the Harvest Moon, which is tomorrow night. In return, you will swear not to allow your people to harm us, lure us from our homes, place changelings in our cradles or execute curses against us. In essence, your people will not be allowed to walk these lands, and they shall be recognized as the lands of humanity."

There were a few titterings and catcalls among the Faerie at this. Oberon silenced them with a wave of the hand. "What else?"

"I further propose a Pact, between us, against the Enemy and his Dark Ones, which is to say, those among your kind that have elected to become his minions. You must keep them from harming us, and we will do what we can to keep them from harming you."

At this point, many of the Faerie voiced their contempt of the humans and the Kindred. They called out shrill insults toward the humans, and some tried to slip away into the trees and circle around behind the mortals. Oberon deliberated for but a moment.

"I accept," he said, as Myrrdin had gambled he would, for Oberon himself was almost as afraid of Herla as was Myrrdin. The added power of Vaul would do much to hold his nemesis at bay. The Faerie were shocked, and quieted suddenly. Bright eyes suddenly slitted and became dark as many of them vanished into the trees to show their disapproval.

Despite their misgivings, the Fair Folk honored Oberon's word,

ceasing their cruel tricks. The rainbow strode away toward a distant storm cloud without releasing its wrath. On the thirty-first night, a great Offering was gathered. From that year to this, for many centuries, when the moon waxes gibbous and heavy with orange light and hangs low and full in the sky, the Offering is made. In this way has the Pact and the peace been maintained.

Chapter Twenty

The Harvest Moon

There had been a gasp or two when Gudrin had mentioned Stone Island, the very land on which they stood, but everyone had managed to keep from interrupting her story until she was finished.

“The town common! You were talking about our faerie mound!” broke in Tylag, his eyes gleaming.

Gudrin didn't take offense this time, as she could tell that her audience was well in hand. She merely glanced up and nodded, a smile playing on her lips. She took a long draught of beer from a mug that was offered her and sat back to rest. With the now familiar ritual, she closed her book, wrapped it, and tucked it under her arm.

After thinking about Gudrin's story, there was little debate left in the council members. It was speedily decided that the Talespinner should stand in for Myrrdin. As twilight was only a few hours away, they adjourned and everyone headed for the town common.

The Harvest Moon Festival was in full swing now, with many folk from Riverton, Hamlet, North End, Swampton and even distant Frogmorton feasting and reveling. There were contests of strength and speed, foot races and tree felling. The berrywine casks flowed freely and many of the people wore masks with floating ribbons and gauze in the guise of the Faerie. Usually stolid and unwavering in their conduct, men and women danced with partners that they would not recall in the morning. Children formed their own faerie rings around tall poles, winding ribbons of every hue into shimmering rainbows.

As twilight fell bonfires were lit upon the common. Yellow firelight illuminated the dome tents and cast wild shadows of the dancing revelers upon them. Brand watched the shadowy forms on the tent walls and once thought to see the capering form of a true goblin. He turned to examine the dancers, but all were human.

Above everything, the moon waxed full and washed the common with its dusky orange light. As it was every year, something of the Wilds slipped through into the River Haven. Things that were held at bay during the rest of the year awakened under the Harvest Moon. The term of the old Pact had ended and the new Pact had yet to be renewed, and in that brief span of time, the people were lost to the effects of the Fair Folk and the full moon.

Brand looked upon the festival differently this year, finding a kind of terror in it to think of a world where every night was lost such as

this one was. What would the world be like without the Pact? Everything good and solid in his life looked now to him as a treasure suspended above flame by a tiny fragile thread. Should the thread ever break, all he had ever known would be lost.

Gudrin climbed the hill at the end of the common to the grove of trees that hid the faerie mound. Only Modi accompanied her, against the wishes and warnings of the clan leaders. Modi had promised not to enter the glade, but only to stand in the trees and observe. The council warned him that only the Talespinner should be present, and that any other entering the clearing did so in peril of his life and soul. Modi only grunted in acknowledgment before stumping after Gudrin who had begun the trek. Gudrin walked as one burdened, and appeared to everyone to be older than she had at any other time. She kept her wide-brimmed hat pulled low over her brow, bore her odd rucksack over her hunched shoulders and kept her book clamped beneath her arm.

“It's time, boys,” hissed Telyn in their ears. Brand and Corbin turned to find her face poked between the two of them. “Here are your wards,” she said, handing each a circle of river stone with a hole worn in the center and a thong of leather run through it. They took them and hung them about their necks. “I found them in stream beds, worn through naturally. Drilled holes wouldn't work.”

“Where's yours?” asked Brand.

“This lucky ash leaf is even more potent, but more fragile,” Telyn said as she fluttered her charm at him. The lucky ash leaf bore two terminal leaflets instead of one. She met his eyes and he frowned at her, reaching to take her arm. This was all the warning she needed. With a laugh, she evaded him and ran away into the darkness behind one of the domed tents.

“By the River,” swore Brand. “She'll not escape us so easily this time!” He and Corbin ran after the fleet-footed girl, cloaks flying and heavy boots crunching the slushy earth.

“Hey!” shouted Jak behind them. “Where are you off to?”

Brand and Corbin made no attempt at replying, knowing that they would need all their attention to keep Telyn in sight. She led them on a merry chase, darting between vendors' carts and under tables spread with fine foods. Corbin, rather than following her every step, chose to drop back a bit and cut the corners of her winding, twisting path. He even managed to snatch up a leg of roast fowl on the way past a table that boasted an excellent feast. Brand, lost to the chase, ran on his long legs with abandon.

There were many cries of distress at their passing. “Hey you louts!”

“Stop running!”

“The Rabing boys are after that Fob girl! I wonder what she's stolen now!”

“You've crushed my foot!”

“Off with you then!”

Soon, a pattern emerged from Telyn's mad course: each twist, every turn, took them closer to the wooded area at the base of the hill that backed the common. Brand, worried that she would vanish in the mirk below the trees, put on an extra burst of speed. Corbin, huffing and blowing, groaned and then followed suit.

Telyn glanced back at them, and for a moment Brand was gratified to see her teasing face take on a cast of concern. They were clearly gaining on her. She stopped laughing and gave herself to running directly toward the woods.

She did actually reach the trees before Brand caught up. She danced behind a tree and Brand fell against the other side, eyeing her around the trunk, and breathing hard.

“Brand Rabing, don't you touch me,” she gasped between gulps of air.

“Give over this folly, Telyn! I'm not about to have you taken to serve some ungrateful elfkin as a foot maid!” said Brand, reaching for her. She shrieked and ran laughing into the forest. Knowing he was about to lose her, Brand threw himself at her, and managed to catch hold of her foot. They both fell in a tangled heap, leaves flying.

Chapter Twenty-One

The Shining Lady

They sat up and regarded each other for a second. Brand thought she was the most lovely thing in the world, seen only in the light of the bloated Harvest Moon, with twigs and leaves in her hair and streaks of dirt on her face. He bent forward to kiss her.

“Hullo there!” shouted Corbin, huffing into the trees and cupping his hands to call to them. He tossed aside a clean bone from the fowl he had devoured on the way. Brand and Telyn straightened suddenly, feeling foolish. Brand helped her to her feet. He kept one hand on her arm, even after she was standing.

“Oh, there you are,” said Corbin, putting his hands on his knees to relax and breathe more freely. “Oh, I can't believe you caught her, Brand. I would sooner chase one of the Wee Folk into the High Marshes!”

“Yes, she will see nothing of the Faerie tonight,” said Brand.

“Oh, but how wrong you are,” breathed Telyn. The boys turned to her with questioning looks, but she was looking away, into the forest. They followed her gaze.

There before them, deep in the forest, moved a stealthy shape. In the darkness, they would not have been able to see it, but it gave off a pale blue-white radiance. It went from tree to tree in a crouch, ignoring them and heading for the top of the hill. Brand estimated the creature to be perhaps half his height. An elfkin? A manling or a goblin? He couldn't tell. Reflexively, his hand went to the ward hung around his neck. Relief flooded through him to find that it was still there.

“One of the Fair Folk,” whispered Telyn. Her voice was that of one seeing the divine. While they watched in stunned silence, the creature turned to look at them. Its eyes slitted and its ears laid down as would a cat's, then it opened its mouth to reveal thin delicate fangs that glistened with unearthly light. It turned from them and moved deeper into the forest.

“A goblin,” whispered Brand, half to himself. “I had never thought such a creature would be so entrancing.” He turned to look down at Telyn, but she was no longer at his side. He looked around wildly, then noted that the disappearing goblin had a fluttering shadow following it that did not glimmer in the darkness.

“Damn her silent feet! We must go after her, Corbin,” Brand said,

beginning to run.

"I rue the day I became your cousin," lamented Corbin, trotting after him.

They caught up with Telyn at the edge of the clearing in which the faerie mound stood. The goblin was nowhere in sight, but what Brand saw in the clearing quickly made him forget everything.

A hundred of the Faerie or more thronged the clearing. Winged figures fluttered about in a circle, dancing about the ancient barrow as though walking on air. Many more earth-bound shapes cavorted and leaped in the grass. There were tall ones, almost as big as a man, and tiny ones, no larger than sparrows. All of them, even those most alien of aspect, held an unearthly beauty that took the breath from the mortals. All were sleek of limb and easy of movement, their impossibly smooth muscles rippling beneath their pale white skins. From each of them, a pale blue-white nimbus glowed. From the entire assemblage a powerful combined radiance shined, so that the clearing was lit up as if by the light of a dozen full moons. Brand knew that they reflected the moonlight, which was the source of the radiance. On nights such as this one, when the moon was round and full, the Fair Folk became the Shining Folk.

Oh, and the music, the sweet music! It filled Brand's head with glories untold! The heady scents of honey and hot spices and wild flowers assaulted him as well, overwhelming his senses. Caught and paralyzed like a rodent beneath the stooping falcon, he could do nothing but stare.

The Faerie floated and danced, feasting upon the Offering, which covered the mound and much of the clearing. One of them took notice of the River Folk and flittered close. Brand stared at the tiny form, a perfectly-shaped nude female with hair of gossamer and wings of fragile crystalline light. So exquisite was her beauty that he took a step forward, all but entering the clearing. She smiled at him, and came closer. She could not have been more than a foot in height, but he could little resist her beauty all the same. He felt a restraint, and looked down to see that Telyn had his arm, and was trying to keep him from walking forward.

"Hold your ward close!" she hissed to him. He did as she told him slowly, like one moving in a dream. The tiny female Faerie halted her advance and backed away. She flittered back to join the others, giving him a final regretful shake of her tiny head.

Now that he had his ward in his hand, Brand found that he could think somewhat more clearly. A bare sliver of concern impinged upon his mind as part of him realized how close he was to his doom. He blinked in confusion.

A booming voice rolled across the clearing and the crass rude

tones of it ripped a hole in Brand's heart. The entrancing power of the Faerie left him, and he felt a terrible wrong had been done. That a sad, sad mistake had been made. He missed the power of their spell with all his being.

The voice belonged to Gudrin, who had now stumped into the open. She spoke to the Fair Folk as though they were worthy of no special reverence, as though they weren't exalted beyond all mortal pretenses. Brand felt she was a crude thing, insulting, an animal with the presumption to speak to its betters. It took some moments before he was able to comprehend the words.

Reading from her book, Gudrin spoke at length in a ritualistic fashion, presenting the Offering to the assembled Faerie. The Fair Folk all but ignored her, seemingly intent on little other than devouring all they could of the feast. When the Talespinner asked who among them would accept the Offering on their part and renew the Pact, there came from the Faerie only scattered tittering laughter.

Gudrin closed the book with a thump audible across the clearing. She took a step forward, brushing aside a Wee one that had gotten too near her heavy boots. She raised her arms on high and held her book aloft. “I demand that your lord come forth to meet me!” she cried. “I speak on the behalf of all the River Folk!”

Suddenly, a figure of astounding beauty appeared before her, as if stepping through a door in the empty air. She was tall and lithe, dressed all in white, with long hair of spun gold and eyes of silver. Her unearthly beauty struck through to Brand and Corbin, so that both of them gasped and went weak at the knees. No human woman could ever possess such beauty, for she was perfect. Brand felt a rush of blood run through him. He was suddenly full of heat and passion as he had never felt before. His mind burned. Corbin took a half step forward, and then fell to his knees groaning and holding his ward to his eyes.

“The Shining Lady!” gasped Telyn in terror. “Brand, Corbin, avert your eyes! She is one of the shades in league with the Enemy!”

The boys tried to turn their faces, but only Corbin succeeded, keeping his ward to his face in trembling hands. Brand couldn't tear his eyes away from the most beautiful female creature that had ever lived.

Even Gudrin was affected. She staggered forward, and then halted, swaying slightly. Still, her hands were outstretched above her. The golden clasp of her book glinted in the moonlight.

“Look upon mine beauty,” the Lady said to Gudrin, “Accursed, Ugly creature, constructed of oil and filth, is it not thy heart's desire to share in my perfection?” The glimmering figure drifted down the mound ever so slowly.

“Lady,” said Gudrin, her words coming with difficulty. “Lady, why are you here? Why do you torment us?”

“Brand, something is wrong!” Telyn hissed in his ear. “Brand, we must get away from here!”

“A kiss, only one kiss,” mumbled Brand.

She shook him, and Brand was distantly aware of her, but his mind was focused upon the Shining Lady. He took a full step forward and now stood at the edge of the clearing. Sweat poured from him, his head had filled with sweet music and the powerful smells of lilac and mint. In desperation, Telyn tugged at him, but against his tense muscles, she could do nothing. Corbin remained on his knees, clutching his ward and shivering.

The Shining Lady took notice of Brand then, and did turn upon him. She drifted closer, swaying a bit. Her hands wove themselves together in mock embraces, her lips moved softly. Brand knew what she wanted. It was only a kiss she wanted, just one single kiss. Her radiant skin shone through her white gown, revealing all but her feet, which were said to be the talons of a bird of prey.

He took another halting step toward her.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Goblins

Telyn moved between Brand and the Lady and talked insistently to him, but he didn't hear her words. He saw only the Lady. But, for a spare second, he managed to glance down into her face. Telyn was beautiful to him, an earthly beauty.

"Telyn," he said.

Then, somehow the spell had broken. He stumbled backwards and turned his eyes from the Shining Lady.

Gudrin swayed no longer. Gathering herself, she held her book before her as the River Folk held their wards. "I banish you! Offer us nothing! Your embrace will result in no beauty for me, but only ugly death. To touch you is to know death, agony and ecstasy, triumph and terrible defeat. By the Teret, the book of the Kindred, I banish you!"

The Shining Lady paused and a sadness came over her that was hard for Brand to bear. With a final, regretful, heart-wrenching tilt of her head, she glided back and away. Her golden hair floated about her lovely face, but there was no breeze. She paused, and then looked over to Brand. She smiled then and raised her hand in a gesture of farewell. Brand might have run to her, but then she winked out, sliding away into nothingness.

Gudrin dropped her arms. Her head lolled against her chest and her shoulders slouched forward as if she had undergone a great exertion.

But her trials were not at an end, as another shadowy figure on horseback walked his dark steed forward. From him the elfkin and the Wee ones fled, crying out their fear in their small voices. His horse had red eyes and a long mane and tail of white which shone upon its sleek coat of black. It snorted and tossed its head, as if wanting to be away and galloping. "It is you who are banished, talespinner," said the shadow man, his voice at once melodic and sinister.

"The shadow man," said Brand vaguely, coming partly to his senses. He was still captivated by the Shining Lady. Corbin regained his feet, but leaned on a tree trunk for support.

"We must leave!" insisted Telyn, trying to rouse them. "Things are not as they should be!"

"Ah, Voynod the Bard," said Gudrin, nodding to the shadow man in recognition. "I have been tracking your whereabouts of late. You and your master have done much to circumvent the Pact. Oberon will

no doubt chastise you for your adventurousness."

Voynod chuckled, a sound like the music made by water in a rocky stream. "The Pact is broken. It will not be renewed. Go back to your mountain burrow, talespinner. These muck-dwellers are not your people. You need not die for them."

With those words, Voynod turned his horse's head and retreated, and the forest swallowed him whole. The goblins, sprites, elfkin and Wee ones that remained continued to eat and drink, feasting as would stray dogs that have starved for many days in the wild. The sounds of their gulpings and slurpings filled the clearing. Brand saw them with a new clarity now. He saw more and more goblins it seemed, and in fact, among them were others that did not shine. They were like goblins, but larger, more man-like. These hairy, fanged creatures were bestial in their manner, and openly took the remains of the ravaged Offering from the smaller Faerie. One of the Wee ones, holding fast to an apple it had claimed, was scooped up and tossed across the clearing. It caught itself and ran with great hops into the forest, clutching the apple with its coattails fluttering behind.

Gudrin cried aloud several times for Oberon to come forth, for any lord of the Faerie to accept her Offering and renew the Pact. None answered her save the snickers and catcalls of those that were gorging themselves upon the goods that the River Folk had worked so long and hard to gather.

The three River Folk, having regained enough of their composure to retreat from the clearing, set out for the common. Their mood was one of deep shock and dismay. The idea that the Pact was broken was unthinkable.

"What will happen to us all?" asked Corbin aloud. "Will we all find changelings in our cradles? Will the Shining Lady croon promises of lust and beauty outside our windows at night and drink our lives?"

"Did we have anything to do with this?" asked Brand, voicing his greatest fear.

"No," said Telyn firmly. "The signs have been evident for months. The Faerie are no longer keeping the Pact with any devotion, that is clear to see. Many things have crossed the borders, and we have been stalked by such as Voynod himself across the breadth of the Haven."

"Could they perhaps have waylaid Myrrdin? Perhaps this is all part of a plot that has been long building," said Brand.

"And what were those things that ate with the Fair Folk? Were they beasts or men?" asked Corbin.

"At least I can answer that," said Telyn. "I believe they were Rhinogs."

The boys looked at her in horror. "Half-breeds?" said Corbin, aghast. "The offspring of goblins and human women? Such are strictly

against the Pact."

Telyn could only nod. Brand numbly realized that if Rhinogs were being bred, that could only mean that war was at hand. The brutes were good for nothing else.

Corbin pointed off at a glimmering shape half as tall as a man that stole forth to leer at them before disappearing again into the trees. "Isn't that fellow the goblin we followed up here?" The others agreed, and they all walked with greater care. The shadowy forest seemed to be hiding something.

"Hello?" came a call from down the hill. Brand thought it was Jak's voice.

"Hello?" Brand answered back.

"Hello, hello, hello?" mocked strange voices from all around. The three of them halted in sudden apprehension. The dark woods seemed to close around them, hemming them in. The trees were no longer friendly. Peering into the gloom, they picked out half-seen shapes that flittered and glowed. Somewhere to their left, the metallic edge of a weapon gleamed.

"Brand, Corbin?" came Jak's voice again, more distantly this time, from somewhere downhill in the blackness.

"Brand, Corbin? Corbin, Brand? Hello?" mocked strange voices. The trio halted again and wheeled, trying to locate those that stalked them. The boys wished that they had not left their woodaxes at Drake Manor. Telyn's long thin knife appeared in her hand.

"The goblins hunt us," hissed Telyn.

"Hunt us."

"I think Jak is downhill somewhere," Brand whispered to the others.

"Hunt-"

"Jak-downhill."

"Hunt us-"

Chapter Twenty-Three

Oberon

Stealthy shapes moved closer, they could feel them now, a closing ring. Here a bush rustled, there a fallen leaf cracked. Instinctively, they put their backs together and circled, hands and eyes wide. Brand and Corbin groped at the ground for a rock, a branch-anything.

Heavier footsteps crashed through the brush toward them. A single thought ran through Brand's mind, turning it to ice. Rhinog.

He felt a rock, heaved it up in both hands, ready to smash down, ready to kill.

“Brand?”

“Jak!” shouted Brand, coming forward in relief. “Look out, they're all around us!”

The goblins attacked. Small bows hummed. Glimmering shapes charged forward, leering. Jak cried out and fell, then stumbled back to his feet clutching at his leg.

“Run for it!” roared Brand. He rushed their tormentors, heaving his rock at them. Corbin and Telyn charged with him, yelling. On the way he lifted up his limping brother and they all ran blindly into the darkness. Behind them feet pattered on dry leaves as the goblins gave chase.

Somehow in the darkness, Brand lost Corbin and Telyn, who fled on ahead. It was not their fault, he realized. In the darkness they had not understood that Jak was injured. Blindly he and his brother stumbled forward, Jak limping, Brand holding his arm across his shoulders and half dragging him. After a time they came to a place where the land seemed to bottom out. There was no clear way to go that was downhill. Brand realized that they were lost and he all but despaired. He listened for a moment, but heard nothing of Telyn or Corbin or the goblins. He could hear only their labored breathing and the night sounds of the forest. Crickets chirped and a chill wind rattled the finger-like winter branches.

“Come on, Jak. We've got to get back to the common,” he whispered. Jak made no reply. Brand helped him up and started forward. Jak was limp now, he was only dragging him. He stopped, realizing that his brother must have passed out. With hands fumbling in the darkness, he felt his brother's body, searching for wounds. He found one arrow in his leg, another in his breast. The wounds were sticky with blood he couldn't see. Should he pull out the arrows? No,

he thought, not when he could not see to staunch the blood.

He took a moment to try and think. Blind panic would probably lead to both their deaths, he told himself. He had to think. Where were the goblins? In which direction lay the common?

Of the goblins there was no sign. He hoped that this did not mean that they had gone after Corbin and Telyn instead of him. He reasoned that if he just kept on in any direction, within a mile or so he should come out of the trees. He was on the corner of an island, after all, much of which was inhabited. This section was perhaps the most wild, due to a natural tendency of folk not to live too close to the faerie mound, which was the only place that the Fair Folk could appear on Stone Island that he knew of. The forest was not endless, he had to come out somewhere along the line.

So Brand picked a direction, heaved up his brother, feeling very glad that he had outgrown him, and set out. The going was hard. There were thickets of berry bush to be crashed through or circumvented. Everywhere the trees blotted out all but a rare gleam of moonlight. Soon his legs were wooden and his arms as heavy as lead. Jak grew heavier and wheezing coughing fits wracked his body. Brand walked on as if in a dream, wondering if Jak would be dead in his arms when he won through the forest, as the farm girl had been in Myrrdin's arms so long ago.

He wept for a time in fear for his brother's life and for all the Haven, but kept going all the while. Blinking and stumbling as if in a waking dream, he became aware that he was not alone. Someone was pacing him, off to one side. He pressed forward, not knowing what else to do. He cast about as he went, but could find no suitable weapon. He bitterly recalled Modi's words when he had sought to relieve himself of his woodaxe. Keep it with you, the warrior had said. Better words had never been spoken.

The thing pacing him was stealthy. Whoever or whatever it was, it made almost no sound. Fortunately, it seemed content to simply walk through the forest, shadowing him, no more than a stone's throw away. Every now and then he caught sight of a glimmer or heard a tiny sound from this shadow. Brand worried and fretted, but tried not to show it. Was it a goblin captain? Was it Voynod, toying with him? Or worse yet, the Enemy himself?

Finally, he could stand it no longer. “Speak, shadow!” he commanded angrily.

“Hush! Sing not aloud for the Dark Ones. They hunt thee still,” came the reply. It was a soft, odd sound. Words such as the winds might speak, if they had a voice.

“Are you friend or foe?” whispered Brand, refusing to be commanded to silence by another of the haughty Faerie.

“I am thy friend, and thy foe, both and none.”

Brand was in no mood for riddles. “Then you must serve my enemies. Begone!”

“I serve none but myself,” came the reply.

“Then why trouble me?”

“We hath both lost something precious. Thou hast lost thy way through the woods, and I have lost something of perhaps even greater value. We hath this in common, among many other things. My future is intertwined with thee. Thou art a potential ally and foeman, both together.”

They walked on a while, Brand pausing every so often to see if Jak still lived. Each time he heard his brother take another gasping breath, he felt both relief and pain. He wondered if the forest would ever end. He estimated he had been slogging through the trees for an hour or more. The only possibility was that he had taken the longest possible route, missing the cliffs and all roads, walking across the wild back end of the Drake estate. Another idea struck him: could he be walking in circles? Perhaps that was this creature's foul game.

“I will be stalked by you no further,” he said, halting. “Either come forth and try to kill me if you dare, or leave me to my suffering.”

The other stopped for a minute as well and both fell silent. Brand had begun to wonder if his shadow had fled, when it spoke again. “I have decided. I will neither kill you nor leave you to die. I will point the way.”

Suddenly, the figure revealed itself to Brand. Brand took an involuntary step backwards. The Faerie appeared as a boy of perhaps twelve, but with pointed ears and eyes that held wisdom and great age in them. He was as white-skinned as fresh milk. Despite the bitter cold he wore only a pair of soft leather pants. Even his feet were bare.

“Look there!” said Oberon, for Brand knew in his heart that it must be the Faerie lord. He pointed over Brand's shoulder and into the depths of the trees.

Brand looked, and thought to see a tiny glimmering light, like that of a single candle in the distance. He felt relief flood over him. The candle meant home and hearth, a house and other human beings. Perhaps Jak would live through the night.

He turned back, but his shadow had fled. With only a moment's pause, Brand stumbled forward, toward the light. He knew he could be walking to his death, lured into a trap by trickery, but he had run out of options. The forest could have gone on for miles, and he doubted he could bear his brother through the whole of the frozen night, even should Jak live so long.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Jak

Half dreaming, Brand made his way toward the beacon. Although at first it seemed that it must be very near, he trudged on and on without end. Only very slowly did he approach it, as if it were at the end of a long, long tunnel through the night and trees. Jak grew heavier with each step. Now he no longer checked to see if his brother lived, for if he had died, he knew he wouldn't drop the body, so it didn't matter. As it was, only dogged determination saw him through the hours, putting one foot before the other, then repeating the process. Nothing else mattered to him. His head soon dipped to his chest, coming up only after every score of slow steps to see if the light yet burned ahead. Each time it was still there and it would seem a trifle brighter, giving him heart. After he had traveled this way for what seemed the entire night, he came into a stretch of bog. The muck slipped and slished beneath his tired feet, and it was all he could do to struggle onward. He groaned aloud, but was barely aware of it. The light did indeed seem brighter now, and only its promise kept him going.

The moon waned and began to set, making the darkness of the forest total. Up ahead in the dimness, he thought he heard something coming. He halted, swaying, and listened. The clopping sound of a horse came to him. He let Jak sag down to the wet ground. Could it be help? More likely, he thought bitterly, it was some other of the Dark Ones, perhaps Herla himself, leading his coursers forward to finish the hunt. If it was the Wild Hunt, he sorrowed that he would give them little sport, for he was utterly spent.

The horse came closer and a lantern shone in the night. Brand now wondered if it was the lantern of Old Hob, the eldest and worst of the goblin lords. Was this the light that he had spent the night trying to reach?

The horseman wandered near and passed, not seeing him where he stood motionless in the dark. He seemed to be looking for something, and there was a familiar shape to him beneath his cloaks. Brand straightened, but before he could hail the horseman, the other had cupped his hands to his lips and shouted, “Brand!”

Brand tried to speak but couldn't. Only a dry croak issued from his throat. He swallowed, coughed, then tried again. “Corbin!” he rasped.

The rider halted in surprise, then turned and saw him. The rider came closer and Brand saw that it was indeed Corbin, straddling the shaggy brown pony, Tator.

“Brand! We thought that the goblins had taken you back to their land forever!” shouted Corbin, dismounting and coming to meet his cousin. He halted when he saw Jak's crumpled form. “Is that Jak?”

Brand only nodded, too weak to speak. Corbin wasted no more words. He lifted Jak as gently as he could and placed him in the saddle, where he was forced to hold him in place. Together, they set off.

“How did you come here?” Corbin asked him. “I've only just set out, and I didn't think to find you for miles. We all thought that you were lost in the wilds of the Drake estate.”

“I have followed a light all night. Am I not on the Drake estate? Where are we? Is there shelter near? I fear for my brother's life.”

“Shelter indeed, cousin. Look!” said Corbin. Brand looked up and halted. Before them stood the rambling house of Tylag and Suzenna Rabing. Somehow, he had won through to Froghollow, and never had a sight been more welcome to him.

“There, there is the beacon!” said Brand, pointing to an upstairs window. But even as he spoke, he realized that the window was shuttered, and that no light issued forth, nor could any have possibly done so.

“Scraper's candle,” said Corbin as he helped Brand along with a guiding hand. Tator moved with delicate steps, almost as if he were aware of his injured rider. “She lit it again tonight, for you and Jak. Perhaps she is a fledgling sorceress after all.”

Brand was too weary to answer. Now that they had made it to shelter, his strength left him. Corbin shouted and brought all the household out to meet them. Brand was vaguely aware of a swarm of concerned faces and questions, to all of which he only blinked in confusion.

Gudrin appeared and took charge of Jak. “Aye, he lives yet, but only just. We must remove the arrows and hope fortune is with him tonight.”

Aunt Suzenna cried aloud at the sight of the black-feathered arrows that had pierced Jak. “If you have the craft to heal him,” she told Gudrin. “I will be your aide.”

Gudrin nodded and prepared for the surgery. She shouted orders for all the lanterns, oil lamps and mirrors in the house to be gathered into the kitchen. They arranged the lights and the mirrors to concentrate the light upon the table. Finally, when all was ready she and Tylag bore Jak away to the kitchen table while Corbin saw to the horses.

“I imagine you have quite a tale to tell yourself, boy,” said Modi, who had come and taken Brand's elbow. It took Brand a moment to realize that the warrior was leading him toward a couch, not into the kitchen where Jak lay dying. He protested, but Modi's grip was like that of a boulder shaped into a hand. “You need rest, boy. You listen to me-this time.”

Brand met the warrior's eyes, and they were stern, but not unkind. He let himself be led to the couch where he collapsed.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Elf-Shot

Well after daybreak, he slowly became aware of someone bathing his forehead with a cool damp cloth. His eyes fluttered open to find Telyn bent over him, her face pinched in worry. He thought he had never seen a lovelier sight, not even the Shining Lady could move him the way this tanner's daughter could. "Telyn, does Jak live?"

"Of course," she answered, her face brightening. "He is feverish, but should recover. Gudrin is a miraculous healer. There are so many crafts I could learn from such as she."

"The shafts have been removed then?" he asked.

Her face clouded. "Yes, but-"

He gripped her arm. "But what?"

She pressed him down again, and he let her do it, for in truth he felt as weak as a kitten. "You must rest, Brand. You are not well either. You strove mightily with the Faerie last night, and such things take a grim toll from mortals, to say nothing of dragging your brother through miles of forest."

"Ah, yes," said Brand, remembering the long night. "I saw your beacon Telyn. It was my only hope when all else was lost. It was your sorcery that saved us."

Her hands plucked idly at the damp cloth she held. "No, it was all my fault that you got into this in the first place. Jak is almost dead because I wouldn't listen to reason. It's fine for me to endanger my own skin, but I can't forgive myself for nearly killing us all with my rashness."

Brand sat up, although it was a mighty effort. He put his arm around her. "I'll not have that! I was the one the shade began tracking in the first place. I could just as easily say that the breaking of the Pact was on my head!"

"What utter foolishness," said Telyn, but he could hear the gratitude in her voice.

"Now, tell me the whole truth about Jak."

She cast him a concerned glance, then looked back to the cloth in her hands, which was now wound into a knot. "The shafts came out easily, Brand, but the heads did not."

"What do you mean?" asked Brand, feeling cold inside.

"I mean that the arrow points are still in him, somewhere… Brand?"

But she was talking to his back, for he had already started for the kitchen. There, in the brightly lit room which he had supped so many times so well, Jak lay. His flesh was bloodless and white, but his breathing appeared regular. Brand gripped the doorjamb for support. Gudrin held something pinched in a pair of tongs which she held aloft to the light. It was a tiny flint arrowhead. She rubbed her chin then dropped it into a pewter pitcher. The water in the pitcher bubbled and hissed briefly, then fell silent.

“That's one,” grunted the talespinner. She eyed Brand gruffly, but didn't order him from the room.

“Is that from his chest?” asked Brand.

Gudrin nodded. “The other has gone deeper still. I only just decided he was mended enough to go for them, and it was critical that I did so now.”

“Why?”

Gudrin gestured to the pitcher. Brand stepped forward and peered into it. There was no sign of the arrowhead. “What happened to it?”

“The arrowheads are enchanted. There is no question about it, your brother was elf-shot.”

“Elf-shot?” Brand echoed. Stunned, he looked at his brother's leg wound. “There is still one of them in him?”

“Yes, worming its way to his vitals. Were you attacked by the elfkin?”

“No, goblins only. At least, we saw no elfkin.”

“Strange,” said Gudrin. She shook her head and prepared to dig into Jak's flesh to remove the other arrowhead. She stepped to the sideboard for a moment, where her book lay open, and read a page or two before returning to her work. Brand noted that her rucksack was stowed carefully beside her book. “That's what the others said. But it is for certain that these arrows are elf-work. Goblins have not the craft. Either there are elves in league with our Enemy, which is fell news indeed, or these arrows were stolen. We have no way of knowing which.”

Gudrin began her digging and cutting then, bidding Brand to hold his brother still. Even in his unconscious state, Jak moaned and writhed in pain.

“Make sure he doesn't reopen his chest wound!” ordered Gudrin. The work was bloody and it was all Brand could do to keep from retching. Modi and Tylag were finally called in to help, while Aunt Suzenna did what she could to make her nephew comfortable. Brand wondered if he could ever enjoy a meal at this table again.

Forcing himself to watch, he looked into the splayed flesh of his brother's thigh. There was a black shape, buried down near the bone. Gudrin reached for it, but it wriggled and half vanished into red

bloody flesh again.

“The River save us!” breathed Brand.

Finally, Gudrin got a grip upon it, and lifted it up. “There's the little cursed thing.”

Aunt Suzenna, who was the best and fastest with needle and thread, set to sealing the wound. Jak's agonized moans subsided. Gudrin and Brand stepped aside and examined the arrowhead.

Gudrin reached out and touched the river stone around Brand's neck. “A River ward, after the fashion of your folk. Hmmpf. Well-made, too. Your work?” she asked Telyn, who nodded. “You have an eye for the craft. If it was not for these wards, or if the goblins had used normal weapons, you would have all been killed. Notice, the arrows struck only Jak, who wore no such ward.”

At this point she yelled aloud and swore in the tongue of the Kindred. She dropped the tongs she had been holding aloft and clutched at the hand that had held them.

“What's wrong?” asked Brand, but Telyn had already snatched up the tongs and grabbed Gudrin's hand. The palm was pooling with blood. Only a stub of the arrowhead was still visible as it burrowed into the talespinner's flesh.

“It got away from me! I'm a fool! An old fool! Can you get it, girl?”

Telyn made no answer, but instead thrust the tongs into the open wound. Red blood spilled and splattered the floorboards. Gudrin grit her teeth and hissed through them, but did not pull away. Brand suddenly became aware of Modi, who was standing very close, watching everyone intensely. His knuckles stood out white upon the haft of his axe.

“Got it!” shouted Telyn, pulling the tongs free. With two quick strides she took the arrowhead to the pitcher and dropped it in. The water bubbled and hissed and soon the cursed thing was no more.

Gudrin swore again, wrapping her hand. “I should have done that in the first place. Thank you, girl.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

Warriors All

“How can we stand against weapons such as these?” demanded Brand aloud.

“Your wards protected you, as I said,” Gudrin told him. While she talked she set a prepared poultice of healing herbs on Jak's wounds. “And we may not be completely without our own special armaments. What puzzles me is why they would use such weapons on young harmless folk such as yourselves. It is a mystery coupled with Voynod's stalking of you. It is clear that the Enemy regards you as some kind of threat. I must have a smoke and a think upon it,” she said. She donned her hat, slung her rucksack, clasped her book and slid it back under her arm.

After checking on his brother, who was now less deathly pale, Brand followed Gudrin out onto the porch. Corbin came after him and pressed a sandwich and a mug of milk into his hands, for which he was grateful. Both of them sat on low-slung porch chairs. Gudrin smoked a delicately carved pipe, the bowl of which was shaped like a bear's head. Blue smoke rose from the bear's gaping jaws.

Outside the day was a fine one, the snow having melted, but there was a chill wind up, and winter could not be far off. Brand enjoyed the feel of the sunshine and waited while Gudrin had her think. Then, however, he recalled his meeting with Oberon. He found it strange that he had forgotten about it until now. Even now, he wondered somewhat if it could have all been a waking dream. He told Gudrin about it, filling in every detail he could recall.

Gudrin leaned forward, puffing on her pipe. She asked several details of Oberon's appearance, and then at last leaned back, satisfied. “It was Oberon, that's for certain. It's a wonder you can recall him so well, however. Perhaps your ward is working better than even it should.”

“Why should I forget seeing him?”

“That is one of the powers of the lord Oberon. He can make folk forget seeing him, speaking with him. It is useful in his manipulation of events,” she said, then fell silent for a time, puffing on her pipe. “But why is even Oberon so convinced of your importance?”

“I find it hard to believe that it's just me. Perhaps we are confusing something. I'm only a River boy from a small isle on the Berrywine. I know nothing more than how to travel water, chop wood

and gather berries."

Gudrin swept away his arguments with a wave of her bandaged hand. "Nonsense. All of you River Haven folk sell yourselves short. The blood of many champions runs in your veins. You must recall that you are the survivors, the descendants of the best of your race. Originally, you were warriors all, and a quarrelsome lot, if the stories are to be believed."

"River Folk? Warriors all? That is hard to swallow."

"Believe it. It is written in the Teret," said Gudrin, striking her book soundly. She took her pipe from her mouth and tapped out the smoldering ashes, then refilled it with fresh stock.

Soon Modi came outside. He stood on the porch near them for a moment, the boards sagging beneath his weight, before moving out into the yard.

"He guards you closely," said Brand.

Gudrin shrugged. "He is of the warriors. His father is a great clanmaster among the Kindred. All of his clan are warriors."

"If they are as big as he is, I can see why," mused Brand. He watched as Modi set up a row of pumpkins on the fenceposts near the road. He readied his axe and began to exercise with it, chopping the pumpkins like the heads of enemies. Each of them fell neatly in half, then in quarters. His swings were precise and powerful. "He cuts only pumpkins, but still I am impressed."

"Modi's clan is an old one. Many of his folk were those that survived Myrrdin's campaign and faced the Faerie when the Pact was forged. It is ironic that he should be here to witness its breaking."

"What are we to do, Gudrin?"

Gudrin compressed her lips, sucking on her pipe for a time before answering. A cherry-red glow brightened in the bear's mouth. "I must march in search of Myrrdin," she said with a sigh. "Only he might know how to reforge the Pact, or perhaps some other way to save the Haven. Besides, my business is with him in any case."

"So you will leave us soon?"

"Yes, as soon as I am sure that your brother will live. Most likely, we will leave at dawn tomorrow. It seems that Myrrdin is delayed elsewhere, although I can think of little save death that would keep him from renewing the Pact. I fear the worst, but still I must find him. I only wish I weren't so weary of travel."

Gudrin's rucksack was at her side. This and her Teret, the book of the Kindred, were never far from her hand. Brand eyed the rucksack and wondered what was the nature of the burden within that it could slow someone as tenacious as Gudrin. He watched it, wondering if it would move, but it did not.

"My burden sleeps," said Gudrin. Brand gave a guilty start.

Gudrin turned to look at him with a twinkle in her water-blue eyes. “You interest me, boy. You alone of your clan can meet my eyes now almost without flinching. That is a rare thing, and I'm not simply boasting. The talespinners of the Kindred have a power in their eyes, and I'm the leader of my clan.”

“It would seem that clans work differently with the Battleaxe Folk,” said Brand.

“Indeed. Let me explain. Among the Kindred, craftsmanship is valued above blood lineage. Each clan has a craft, or a set of crafts, to which its clansmen are born. Therefore, our clan names are representations of our craft, rather than our lineage, although they are generally one and the same.”

“But what if one is born a natural warrior into the clan of talespinners?”

“This is rare, but upon such occasions, a clanmaster or the King can grant a kinsman release from his clan. He is then free to join another, if they will have him.”

“Then as a clanmaster and a clanmaster's son, you and Modi are akin to lords. Why do you trouble yourself to travel alone like this? What could be your mission in the peaceful River Haven?”

“It doesn't seem all that peaceful to me,” Gudrin chuckled. “But we travel alone because a large group would only attract more notice. We wished to go unrecognized. That, of course, was undone by last night. As to the rest, well, we are searching for someone, and we need Myrrdin to find this someone,” she said with finality.

“What should we do to prepare for tonight?” asked Brand. “It seems like the Faerie might put in another appearance now that the Pact is broken.”

Gudrin shrugged.

“There is little to be done. I would suggest that you gather all the animals into the barn and ready up a large pile of firewood.”

Firewood. Brand groaned inside. He didn't want to show it, but he was very spent from the previous night still. Splitting wood right now sounded like punishment.

“Let Corbin do it, boy,” said Gudrin, reading his thoughts.

Brand nodded, but stood up. “I'll help a bit.” Brand did feel much better than the half-dead state he had arrived in last night, but he groaned aloud when he took up the axe. Corbin told him to just take it easy, and the two of them soon made chips fly.

After perhaps a hundred strokes from Corbin and ten or so from Brand, they were both sweating. Modi came up to them to watch.

“What are you doing?”

Corbin glanced at Brand with a twinkle in his eye, but Brand gave his cousin an imperceptible shake of his head. He didn't think it a

good idea to jest with the warrior, which he could tell from long experience was what Corbin had in mind. Corbin scowled a bit, and simply continued chopping. Brand turned to Modi, his hands resting on his axe. “We are splitting firewood.”

Modi nodded, as if this were a weighty statement. He examined Corbin's strokes for a few moments. Corbin ignored him. Brand was a bit taken aback by Corbin's manner, as it was not normal for him.

“Corbin has a better build for the axe,” said Modi at last. “But you Brand, despite your fatigue, are more skilled with it.”

Corbin halted, his sides heaving slightly. Sweat stood out on his brow despite the cold. “Perhaps you would like to demonstrate for us.”

Modi eyed him for a moment, then nodded. Corbin handed over his woodaxe and backed away. Brand glanced over toward the porch, where he saw that Gudrin still sat and puffed her pipe, watching them.

With deliberate movements, Modi selected a large piece of oak. “There are two difficult points,” he said, touching two knotholes with the heavy axe, which he held in one hand and moved about as if it were a delicate wand. With two smooth motions, he clove away the knotholes with a minimum of wasted wood. Then with four more powerful blows, he divided the wood into even pieces.

Brand was impressed. Corbin, however, seemed a bit out of sorts. He pointed to a heavy stump that lay on its side like a rotted tooth. “Can you cleave that in two with a single blow?” he demanded. Brand shot him a quizzical glance.

Modi took the question in with all seriousness. He eyed the stump and then the woodaxe in his hand. “Not with this,” he said finally. “The head is too small, and the haft would break.”

“Thank you, Modi,” Brand said politely, turning back to the job at hand. He wondered if Modi was serious. Could the warrior have done it? There was no question that the haft of the little wood axe would break with the force of such a blow. But if the weapon were larger and more sturdy…

Could Modi really be that strong?

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Pumpkin heads

Modi crunched snow back to the front yard, where he began to practice with his battleaxe again. More pumpkin heads were halved and quartered. When he was out of hearing, Brand asked Corbin what had gotten into him.

“I'm sorry, but Modi has started to grate on me. He is so arrogant, so obviously disdaining of us. There is something about him that I don't completely trust.”

“I'm shocked to hear this from one who's self-control is legendary,” said Brand. He explained to Corbin who Modi and Gudrin were among the Kindred. Corbin's eyes grew wide to hear that Gudrin was the clanmaster of the talespinners.

When the two of them had split enough wood to last for several days and had hauled it into the shed that adjoined the kitchen, they stopped to watch Modi's exercises. After a time they asked him to give them a lesson in using their woodaxes for war. Modi was happy to oblige and for the first time to their knowledge he seemed about to smile. Modi taught them how to close with an enemy, how to hook his weapon with their own, where to strike for a kill. By the end of it, they both felt that they had learned something. The trio exercised and sweated for two hours until lunch was announced. All the while Gudrin watched them quietly from the porch.

Jak had been carried aloft to rest in the spare bedroom. Brand found that he could eat on the kitchen table that had only hours before seen desperate surgery. Brand and Corbin ate like famished men, as did Tylag and Corbin's brothers, who had returned from the ferry at the base of the cliff to eat.

Tylag was full of ill tidings. “We've been busy all morning. It seems that everyone is leaving the island. The word is that the Rabing Clan broke the Pact and have brought a curse upon all the River Folk.”

“That's ridiculous!” shouted Telyn. “Who says such things?”

Tylag spooned up a load of steaming mussels. “The Hoots and the Silures are at the bottom of it, I expect. But all the folk are scared, and at such a time they will say things they may come to regret. But there is no doubt that the Faerie are no longer protecting our borders from the Dark Ones among them. All of us should move with caution. No one of this clan should be alone after dark.”

After the others had promised to follow his advice in this matter

he made another announcement. “Tonight Suzenna and I go to a closed council meeting at Drake manor. There is talk of a muster.”

Everyone looked up at that. “Are things as bad as all that?” asked Corbin's oldest brother Barlo. “Surely, the rift with the Faerie can be repaired.”

“That's as may be, but we must prepare for the worst,” said Tylag. “No one knows what twilight may bring.”

“But a muster?” burst out Barlo. “What's wrong with the Riverton Constabulary? They have always served us well enough. Let them mount a watch with archers upon the fairy mound and feather the little devils when they come!”

Aunt Suzenna stood up, and everyone turned to her, all thinking of what a muster could mean-and that she had three sons and no daughters. She looked at them sternly. “If there is to be a muster, all my sons shall go, or Clan Rabing will truly be disgraced.”

Barlo could not meet her eyes. He said no more of the Riverton Constabulary. Talk shifted to the unusually cold weather and preparations that they should make to defend the household. Tylag announced he would lock the doors tonight, both front and rear. The boys discussed building an outer fence to circle the homestead during the following weeks. Telyn talked of gathering wards for the lot of them.

Brand noticed that Modi and Gudrin said little. At one point, however, he believed that he saw them exchange glances. He thought to see regret and perhaps a touch of sadness in their eyes. This disturbed him and he left the table early, his head full of thoughts of the coming nights and what they might hold. He didn't think that Tylag and the others had a realistic idea of what they were facing.

The afternoon passed swiftly. Twilight came all too soon for Brand's taste. Each day grew shorter with the approach of winter, he knew, but tonight darkness seemed to fall with great suddenness, as if a cloak had been cast over the eyes of the land. Tylag and Suzenna had long since gone to Drake Manor for the council meeting, taking Corbin's brother Barlo with them. Sam was out using his thick arms to split wood and dragging his lame foot about as the tended the livestock, while Corbin and Brand played Jiggers and Swap-Cards in the parlor. All three of them were content, however, as Sam liked nothing more than to work his body, while the younger boys liked nothing more than competing with their minds. Upstairs, Gudrin and Telyn tended Jak in the spare bedroom, while Modi haunted the upstairs hallway. By the groaning of the floorboards overhead, it was easy for Brand to track his pacing.

“Modi seems anxious to be away,” said Corbin in a low voice. “I wonder how much they know about what will happen here in the

River Haven."

"I don't know," sighed Brand. He was in a reflective mood. All around him were sights and sounds that were among his favorite in the world. He had played in this parlor as a child. He and Corbin had often bounced themselves upon the couches until they were discovered by Aunt Suzenna and chased from the house. Along the walls was a shelf containing a row of perhaps thirty books, each of which that he had read at least twice. A painting of his mother and father, one of only three that still existed, hung from the wall behind Corbin's head. He felt his eye drawn to his mother's image. Tall and sleek she was, with flaxen hair and a mouth that ever curved into a smile. Jak more resembled her, while he more resembled his father. Holding to the tiller of their boat in the painting, his father was dark-haired with a heavy mustache. His eyes were stern and he smiled little.

"Do you really want to play?" asked Corbin softly.

Brand dealt the cards without interest. "Perhaps we should post a lookout," he suggested. "The night is black and the moon has yet to rise."

Corbin shrugged. "Tylag locked the door and Sam is out in the barn. Surely, he will serve as a good lookout until he gets back."

Brand agreed, and played out his hand. When he had lost three hands in a row he conceded the night to Corbin. Thinking of Modi and his lessons today with the woodaxe, he went to the woodshed that adjoined the kitchen and fetched one. Returning to the parlor, he sat with a cloth and whetstone and worked the edge of the blade.

"Don't let my mother catch you with that in her parlor," was all Corbin said as he packed away the cards, the betting beads and the jigger-sticks.

"I just wanted to work out the nicks that we put into the blade this morning-" Brand broke off when they heard a shout from outside.

"That's Sam," said Corbin.

"Sounds like he's in trouble, let's go."

The two of them ran outside, Brand still carrying the woodaxe. The big doors were hanging open, and the sheep were crying in their pens nearby. The barn was dark; there was no outward sign of Sam or his lantern. After the one, brief shout, they heard nothing more from Sam. Corbin stood in the entrance and called for his brother.

"I'll light a lantern," said Brand. He handed the woodaxe to Corbin and took down a lantern from its peg.

Corbin walked away into the darkness, shouting for Sam. Brand burnt his fingers getting the lantern to sputter into life. Sucking on them, he stepped after Corbin in the lantern's flickering circle of yellow light.

“Get out of here!” shouted Corbin suddenly, swinging the axe with great force. An old wooden stool exploded beneath the blow. Brand saw something bound away and clamber up the haystack. He got a better look at the thing when it crested the mountain of hay and stood at its peak, looking down at them. Brand marveled at the lightness of the creature. It did not sink into the hay at all.

There could be no doubt that it was one of the Wee Folk. The manling was male and stood about two feet tall. He had a thin face with sharp features: the nose was like a blade and the chin tapered to a point. The overlarge mouth was stretched into a perpetual grin. Brand examined the tiny clothing in wonder. Tight-fitting hose covered thin legs and the feet wore pointed boots. The boots and his russet-brown waistcoat seemed to be made of doeskin. All the clothing seemed woven with impossibly fine workmanship, each stitch smaller than any human tailor could produce. The manling leered at them and rested his overlarge hands on his bent knees.

“Where's my brother!” shouted Corbin, threatening the creature with the axe.

“He's in several places!” said the manling in his piping voice. This reply seemed to greatly amuse him. He wrapped his thin long arms about himself and shook with laughter.

Corbin moved to swing at the manling, but Brand reached out to stop him.

“At least he's talking to us,” Brand told his cousin. He turned back to the manling. “I've spoken with your lord, Oberon. He has helped me, so you must do the same.”

At this the manling's eyes narrowed. His eyeballs were glass-like beads the color of flint. His grin took on the aspect of an evil leer. “Oberon has been deposed, so his words have no weight.”

“You serve a new lord then?”

The manling shook his head. “The new lord is even less to my liking.”

“Are you still loyal to Oberon then?”

The manling looked about the barn, as if seeing things invisible to the two men. Which perhaps he did, reflected Brand.

He appeared to come to a decision. He bent forward conspiratorially. “I speak for Oberon. He would bid thee to run from this place, man-child.”

“Why? Where should I go?” asked Brand, stepping forward and lifting his lantern higher.

The manling squinted into the yellow light. “Join the Kindred, help them find Myrrdin and learn what must be done. The Wanderer will explain matters.”

Brand nodded. “Thanks for the advice. Can I call the Wee Folk

friends?”

The manling's face grew sorrowful then, he shook his tiny head and tsked at them. “Ever it is so with thy folk,” he sighed. His face grew long and mournful. A hint of his true age showed in his cheeks then, which grew new wrinkles, and his bright, black eyes, which dimmed. “Ever thou wouldst mistake the slightest aid for friendship. True friendship is something which must be earned and which is never given. So big thy kind growns, yet thou hast the minds of children.”

Still making tsking sounds, he bent down and began brushing away the straw at his feet. Brand watched in confusion as he cleared away the yellow straw from what appeared to be a patch of dark fur. The manling glanced at them, and tsked further at their incomprehension. With a sudden sweeping movement and a puff of breath blown through his thin fingers he revealed what was hidden in the haystack.

It was Sam's head.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Dando

Sam's head had been severed at the neck. The eyes were open and staring, the mouth sagged. The manling was standing atop the head, the dark fur that flipped and curled over his pointed shoes was Sam's hair.

Shock froze the two men. The manling watched them with keen interest. Brand felt disconnected from the real world at that moment. It couldn't be that Sam was dead, but his cousin's severed head was undeniable proof. He looked at the manling, and wondered what alien thoughts were in that tiny creature's mind. He seemed very curious at their response, as if he were studying them. Perhaps, for the manling, human grief was a mystery.

Corbin was the first to come to life. Without a word, he stepped forward and made a sweeping cut with his woodaxe at the manling. The manling, ready for such a response, bounded straight up into the air and did a complete spin as he came down, landing again on his gruesome perch. Corbin swung again, and this time the manling performed another impossible leap, bounding up into the hayloft overhead. Brand came to life as the manling flew over their heads and he snatched up a pitchfork. Grimly, not speaking, the two of them clambered up the shaky, steep steps to the loft. Corbin reached the top first and he made a soft sighing sound and fell to his knees. Brand rushed to him, wondering if he had been stricken. He followed his cousin's gaze and found himself staring at the rest of Sam. The headless body, looking oddly incomplete, lay at the edge of the loft. Clearly, the head had been lopped off and had tumbled out of the loft to fall on the haystack.

“Look, he took one with him!” said Brand grimly. He pointed to Sam's thick-fingered hands. In the grip of his dead hands was the dark, furred neck of what could only have been a rhinog. The rhinog was dead, its neck broken.

“Sam must have surprised it in the barn,” said Brand aloud.

They became aware of a scrabbling sound. The manling was trying to pry back a loose board and escape the barn. Corbin rose swiftly and advanced in a crouch. He held his axe at the ready. There was a low growling sound emanating from his throat.

The manling looked up in alarm. “I didn't do it!” he squeaked. “It was the goblins and their rhinog offspring! They follow the Dark Bard!

He is in the bogs even now! We must flee him!”

Corbin continued his advance and the creature fled with great flying bounds, like those of a hare when a fox's teeth are right behind it. He darted beneath a pile of wooden crates. Corbin demolished them with heavy blows of the axe.

Shrieking, the Wee One bounded about, circling the loft. Corbin layed about with the axe in wild abandon. Brand made a calculated thrust with his pitchfork and managed to catch the creature's deerskin boot, pinning it to the rough wood of the loft.

Corbin roared in triumph. The manling shrieked in terror and struggled to free himself.

“Wait, Corbin!” shouted Brand. “Don't kill him! We need answers!”

For a moment Brand feared he had not gotten through to his cousin, who was now not like the boy he had grown up with. His wrath was something terrible to behold. Brand felt that he understood that uncontrollable fury. It was the same feeling that had gotten him through the previous night and allowed him to save Jak. He understood that Corbin was beyond reason, and may well kill the manling in his grief, even though he had not committed the crime.

The axe descended, and the manling cried in fear. The blade thunked into the old planks of the loft, making the timbers shudder. Corbin had spared the creature.

“Do not play with our grief, manling,” Corbin told the quivering creature. He jabbed a finger into the manling's side.

A dark look crossed the manling's sharp features, and Brand thought that he hungered to play a trick on them, perhaps thinking to singe Corbin's finger or turn the offending nail black and rotten. But he didn't dare.

“Now we shall have some quick answers,” said Brand, squatting and setting down the lantern.

“Ever it is with River Folk,” said the manling. “Always blaming the messenger for bad tidings.”

“Tell us your name,” demanded Brand.

The creature paused and looked as if he were about to fabricate a name. Brand moved the lantern very close to him, so that the heat of the fire inside could easily be felt. The manling shrank away in discomfort.

“I am Dando.”

“Where are the rhinogs that did this?” demanded Corbin.

“Outside, in the forest, in the bog, wherever their masters lead them.”

“They are led by goblins?”

“Of course. Rhinogs will only follow their sires.”

“How many of them are there?”

Dando shrugged his small shoulders. “Three goblins have brought their broods. They each have ten or so offspring with them.”

Brand frowned. “The goblins have so many human women to breed such numbers of rhinogs? Don't the rhinogs have families of their own?”

Dando looked at him as if he were a fool. “Rhinogs are mules, boy. As to the prolific qualities of goblins, they are legendary. It is not uncommon for a birthmother to gestate six spratling rhinogs at a time.”

“What a hellish life those poor wretches must lead,” said Brand.

“We must do something for Sam,” said Corbin.

Brand turned to him. “We will, cousin, but first we need to know what we face.” To Dando he said, “Since the people of the River Haven have long been off limits I suppose that most of the women have been taken from the wagons of the Wandering Folk.”

Dando nodded. Brand noted that now that the manling was forced to answer, he was speaking quite openly. He seemed to be enjoying the interrogation, as would the town gossip. What strange creatures were the Faerie.

“Why do they plague us, manling?” asked Brand.

“Ah, good question!” said Dando. His eyes shone with the reflected glow of the moon. His broad smile revealed many white teeth. “Why indeed? I'll tell thee this: they hunt for something lost, and care not one whit for thee nor any others of the River Folk.”

“Enough of this!” growled Corbin. “We must get back to the house.”

“Hold, cousin,” urged Brand. “So, what is their next move? If there are thirty or forty of them, why doesn't Voynod just lead them against us and burn us out now?”

Dando laughed, some of the swagger returning to his manner now that it was clear that they were not going to kill him out of hand. “That is not the way of the goblins. They are raiders by nature. They value their offspring and would rather isolate and kill thee one at a time without endangering themselves.”

“So we would be the next easy prey, as we are out here on our own,” said Brand. He glanced at Corbin, but his cousin was no longer listening. The shock of his brother's death had glazed over his eyes.

There came a sound from outside then. It was a splashing, slapping sound, such as large, flat feet would make in the bog. Then came a human cry, a high-pitched one, like that of a child or a young woman in trouble.

Corbin and Brand rose, taking up the lantern and the woodaxe again. Brand looked down at the manling, who was furiously tugging

at his pinned foot.

“Before you go, Dando, tell us what we hear outside.”

“It's a goblin trick, fool man-child! Hast thou not heard their mocking voices before?” he hissed. “Now free me!”

Brand eased up the pitchfork, and Dando sprang free. He bounded to the edge of the loft, and then glanced back over his shoulder. “Remember, if thy fate is to survive the night, find Myrrdin!” he cried, then sprang out into space. Brand watched him sprint down the far side of the haystack and out the door.

He paused at the doorway and there was a blinding flash of blue light. Where the manling had stood a large barn owl now hopped into the air and took flight. On silent wings it vanished into the night.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Rhinogs

"The owl," said Corbin. "Was that the bird you saw at your window two nights ago? Has that changeling been haunting our barn for weeks?"

"Forget it," said Brand. "We have to run for the house!"

"What about Sam?"

Brand squeezed his shoulder. "We will have to do what we can for him in the morning."

Corbin nodded grimly and followed Brand down out of the loft. They left the lantern in the loft so that it might appear that they were still there. Signaling each other with gestures, Corbin took Brand to a small side door that led into a toolshed. Moving carefully, they opened the creaking door an inch or so to peer outside. When their eyes had adjusted to the starlight, they could see that dark shapes crept about the foundations of the house. Now and then one of the creatures would raise itself to a window and take a quick, furtive look inside.

The rhinogs were much larger than goblins, but smaller than the average man. It was difficult to see just what they looked like as they seemed to carry shrouds of darkness with them, or perhaps it was only that they excelled at crouching in the deepest pools of shadow available. From their general forms Brand made out that they had long arms, overlarge hands and crooked legs that seemed permanently bent backwards at the knees, not unlike the hind legs of crouching wolves. Their eyes were two glittering rubies of evil swimming in the darkness enclosed within their drawn hoods.

There were more movements, at the front and rear of the barn. Clearly, the enemy lay in ambush, waiting for them to come out into the yard. Brand squeezed Corbin's shoulder, they exchanged glances and set themselves. They would have to make a run for the house. Brand's legs tensed as he readied himself to sprint across the yard.

Together they launched themselves at the front door of the house, hoping no one had locked it since they left. They knocked an old rainbarrel aside as they tore out of the barn. In the still night the sound of it clattering to the ground seemed deafening. An odd hooting sound of rage went up behind them. Brand could sense rather than hear their pursuers. Dark, hunched shapes that sulked beneath trees and huddled against the house rose up and turned toward them.

Brand focused on reaching the door of the house before they

could halt him. A dark shape scuttled close and reared up before them. He caught sight of glittering red eyes. Corbin swung the woodaxe wildly, there was an awful thunking sound and a squeal rent the cold air. As they scrambled past the rhinog, a clawed hand caught at Brand's boot. He kicked at the thing and jerked away. Talons scraped and dug into leather, there was another snarling sound, then he was free.

Brand reached the porch and the door first and all but fell into the house. They slammed the door in the leering faces of hunched shapes that mounted the porch steps behind them.

“Modi!” shouted Brand, his chest heaving. For a moment no answer came, and a new fear gripped Brand. Had the enemy taken the house already? Had he risked all only to enter a new trap? Visions of Telyn and Jaks' headless corpses came unbidden to his mind.

Heavy footfalls came down the stairs then, causing Brand to heave a sigh of relief. Only Modi had such heavy boots.

“Enemy?” questioned Modi as he emerged from the darkened hall.

Brand nodded. “Rhinogs. They chased us from the barn.”

Modi looked to Corbin and frowned. “Is he injured?”

Brand followed his gaze and saw Corbin's ashen face, drawn tight with lines of grief. He shook his head. “It's his brother-Sam. The rhinogs killed him.”

Modi nodded. He moved to look out a window, and that's when the door seemed to heave against their backs. Brand and Corbin were still leaning against it, and on the far side the rhinogs had gathered, whispering and hissing. It wasn't as if the door had been shoved, but rather as if it had suddenly come alive and taken in a great swelling breath.

“They work a cantrip!” shouted Modi. “Away from the door!”

Brand and Corbin staggered away from the door and it burst open behind them. The hinges came loose from the doorjamb and the lock shattered into metal shards. Beyond were the smoky, dark shapes of three rhinogs. Long serrated knives gleamed in their clawed hands. Red eyes gleamed beneath their cowls.

Modi strode forward with his battleaxe raised. “Return to your dens! I am Modi of the warriors, and many of you will I slay before this house falls!”

A puff of smoky darkness seemed to obscure the three shapes, and Brand knew sorcery was at hand. He steeled himself for their charge, but instead of attacking, the three shapes seemed to fade from sight. After a moment the magical darkness faded and the porch beyond was empty.

“Have they given up?” asked Corbin.

Modi shook his head, scratching his beard. “It is not their way to fight openly. They have no stomach for it. They are assassins and footpads by nature. Their goblin sires will pull back and devise some new cunning trick.”

Telyn and Gudrin came down then to join them and everything had to be explained. Modi lifted the battered door back into place and used spikes from the woodshed to hold it in place again. Brand armed himself with another woodaxe and helped the others rearrange the furniture into a barricade.

Suddenly, Telyn raised a hand to stop their talk. Brand's mouth opened to ask her what she meant, but then he heard it too. A crackling noise, coming from the back of the house. Moments later smoke poured out of the hall.

“They've fired the house!” hissed Telyn, voicing everyone's thought.

Upstairs, Jak cried out hoarsely and there was a thumping on the floorboards overhead. Brand felt sick, his brother was trying to get out of bed and had fallen. He rushed into the smoky hall.

“Brand!” Telyn cried after him. The smoke-filled hall was a cavern of hanging gray tendrils. His eyes burned immediately and his lungs rebelled with a choked cough. He ducked low, moving in a crouch and it was better, the air cleaner. He passed the kitchen and saw the lurid glare coming from the woodshed. They had fired it, and smoke was pouring into the house. Yellow tongues of flame licked up at the cabinets above the woodshed door. A rack of towels near the sink caught and flared brightly.

Then he was on the stairs and the smoke was worse. He could hear his brother upstairs, coughing and dragging himself across the floor. At least they hadn't crept in the upstairs windows and killed him yet, he told himself.

He found his brother mostly by feel on the floor of the upstairs hall. The lamps had gone out somehow. He set down his woodaxe and groped in the dark. He got a hold of Jak under his arms and heaved him up. A groan of pain escaped his brother's lips.

“Brand?” Jak whispered. “They're up here, Brand.”

Brand caught a fluttering movement in the front bedroom.

“I'm getting you out, Jak,” whispered Brand. He reached for a lamp, thinking to relight it. To his surprise he burnt his fingers on it. Looking closely, he saw that it was still lit, but that it gave only the barest glimmer of smoky, gray light. A lump of ice grew in his stomach as he realized he faced magic. The choking smoke was fogging his mind a bit, but in a flash he realized that they had lured him up here, not killing his brother, but making Jak cry out. That had succeeded in drawing two apart from the others to slaughter them in

this inky smoke.

Brand began to drag his brother to the stairs, when he thought to hear a stealthy sound behind him. He looked back and saw the assassin. Visible only as a patch of deeper darkness in the hallway, the rhinog glided with an oddly inhuman, scuttling gait toward his exposed back, a long silvery knife poised low for a killing thrust. There was no time to reach his woodaxe, so Brand did the only thing he could think of, he grabbed up the hall lamp from its bracket on the wall and hurled it at the creature.

The lamp exploded into yellow flame, the glass oil-vessel shattering and soaking his attacker. A horrible keening erupted from the rhinog and it sunk down, engulfed in flames. To Brand's eyes it seemed to melt like a candle tossed into a roaring fire.

He dragged Jak past the burning creature, which soon fell silent and stopped thrashing. At the top of the stairs he got Jak to his feet and drew one of his brother's arms around his shoulders. Struggling and coughing, trying not to stumble, he headed down the stairs.

At the bottom of the stairs he looked back. A second, smaller shape now stooped over the smoldering remains of the rhinog. It was the lithe form of a goblin, and Brand knew in his heart he faced the dark creature's sire. He and the goblin met one another's gaze for a moment, and never had Brand felt from another such vile hatred.

Then the smoke obscured the scene and he was out in the front room again, where the others had repelled a sneak-attack through the windows. Aunt Suzenna's prized shutters, which she had painted with rosettes and curling vines of her own design, now hung down, battered and scorched. Smoking black drops of what served the creatures for blood splattered the shutters and the sill.

“Brand!” cried Telyn, hugging him. She took up Jak's other arm. “Is he all right?”

Gudrin stepped forward and examined Jak briefly. “He's breathed too much smoke, but he should make it. If any of us do, that is.”

“They've taken the upstairs,” Brand told them when he could speak. All of them were crouched in the front room, where the smoke wasn't too overpowering yet.

“They're firing the house to drive us out into the dark,” said Gudrin.

Chapter Thirty

Berserker

"It is best that we try to break through immediately, rather than waiting until they expect us and we are entirely blinded by smoke."

"The manling we met in the barn said there were three goblins with their broods here, plus Voynod himself," said Brand. "Can we hope to win through such a force?"

Gudrin looked out the window for a long moment. Her face took on a cast of great age and weight. "There is a way," she said, her voice almost a whisper.

"You should leave me behind," Jak told Brand. "I'll only slow you all down. Don't die on my account, someone must tend the isle."

"Forget it," said Brand.

"You could put me in the cellar, where I might live through the fire," suggested Jak. He grimaced with pain at every step. Brand didn't even bother to reply to his brother, thinking that the cellar would never survive the fire that was coming. He felt a pang of sadness for Aunt Suzenna, wondering where she was and hoping she was okay. If the rhinogs didn't kill her outright, he thought that the sight of her beautiful home burnt to the ground would.

At the front door barricade, they held a hurried council.

"Modi, you are of the warriors, what do you suggest?" asked Gudrin.

"We must break through them," said Modi. For the first time since they had met him, the River Folk saw him in his true element. He talked more quickly and acted with greater decisiveness. There was a light in his eyes that had not been there before. Brand thought that he perhaps was only fully alive in the heat of battle. "They are attacking at the front of the house to lead us to attempt an escape at the back, where they doubtless lie in ambush. Therefore, we will exit here, at the front door. Straight into their ranks we will charge.

"But," he said, turning to Gudrin. The two locked eyes. "We need help. I see no alternative but to wield the axe."

Gudrin nodded in agreement. "I will wield it. You must be my second, Modi of the warriors."

Modi's eyebrows shot up. "But I should wield the axe. You are not of the warriors."

"It matters not, for I'm still of the Kindred."

"But you have lived for so many seasons," protested Modi, but he

halted at a sign from Gudrin.

“I will hear no more of it. I bear the burden, so I will wield it,” she said. While they spoke, the room had filled with a pall of black smoke and heat from fires in the back of the house washed their faces. Moving with care, Gudrin held up her rucksack, and for the first time opened it. A golden light shone forth from the rucksack, lighting up Gudrin's face. Something seemed to shift, to move inside the golden light. Reflected specks of gold glinted in her eyes. The River Folk backed away in fright.

“What sorcery is this?” demanded Jak.

“High Magic!” cried Telyn, her eyes bright and her mouth curved in a broad smile.

Gudrin made no answer. She slipped her book into the rucksack and it vanished into the golden light. “For now,” she said solemnly, “I relinquish the wisdom of the Teret and take up the fury of Ambros the Golden. Throw back the barricades!”

Modi and the others hastened to obey her. Resetting the rucksack upon her back, Gudrin reached over her shoulder. Into her hand jumped the handle of a bone-white axe with twin, curved blades of great size. As she drew the weapon from its concealment a great change overcame her. Her aspect shifted from that of a talespinner to that of a warrior, lusting for battle. Her eyes shone with a light terrible to see, and her lips parted into a snarl of fury greater than any rhinog had ever produced. The bone-white axe she lifted high, and in its center was a great yellow Jewel. All there knew it to be the Golden Eye of Ambros, one of the Jewels of Power. A mixture of fear and wonder filled Brand to know he witnessed magic of legendary power.

With an inhuman bellow, Gudrin charged into the shocked faces of the enemy. Behind her came Modi, his battleaxe also lifted high. The others followed, feeling a rage overtake them as well.

Gudrin thrust up her bone-white axe so that the enemy might see the Eye of Ambros, shouting, “Know, foul ones, that you face the wrath of the Golden Dragon! The Lord of Wind and Sunlight is upon you!”

The rhinogs fell back. A band of three stood in the yard, but melted back into the trees at their approach. With a shocking burst of speed, Gudrin charged to where they had vanished. As she reached the treeline, not three but five rhinogs appeared from the brush and treetrunks. They glided forward, springing an ambush. Brand released a cry of anguish as Gudrin, who had somehow outrun even Modi, faced the ambush alone. Stealthy dark shapes came at her from all directions in hunched postures. Their weapons, eyes and gnashed teeth gleamed in the brilliant golden light of the Jewel in the axe. Brand ran faster, sure he was about to witness the talespinner's death.

The axe flashed twice. Each time the white axe rose and fell the Eye of Ambros flashed, illuminating the night for a moment like a stroke of lightning. Two smoking carcasses fell and the rest of the band broke. The Rhinogs ran toward their goblin sires, who now glimmered near the barn.

Gudrin made not for the road, but rather for the goblin sires that were gathering their broods to them for a hasty retreat. Modi and the River Folk could do nothing but follow her. The goblin sires gathered their rhinogs into three ragged lines and led them off into the trees. To Brand's surprise, Gudrin still gave chase, running as Brand had never seen one of the Kindred run before. She caught up with one of the spry goblins when it ran into a thicket and had to turn. Its offspring showed no loyalty and fled in all directions in a panic. The goblin flew at Gudrin, all fangs and long-fingered hands stretched out like claws, but she lopped off its head. Gudrin then ran after another goblin. Deeper in the trees she went.

“We must stop her!” cried Brand, running after Gudrin. “She can't get them all! They'll kill her!”

“The Berserkergang has her in its grip,” said Modi. “It is best that you let her give chase.”

Brand paid no heed, worried that the enemy would fall upon her alone in the forest and shoot her down or take her from behind. He had to run like the wind, but finally he caught up with Gudrin and laid a hand on her shoulder, spinning her around.

Gudrin wheeled with the axe upraised. Brand wondered to see that despite the slaying it had done, the axe had not a single stain upon it. The Golden Eye of Ambros flashed in the blade, lighting up the dark forest as though it were day. The golden flecks still lived in Gudrin's water-blue eyes and Brand thought to see a hint of madness there.

“We've won Gudrin! Control yourself, Talespinner!”

The axe blade flashed, and Brand thought he had forfeited his life, but it struck instead a great oak, biting deeply into the trunk. The entire being of the tree shivered, the finger-like winter branches rattling far above them.

Brand looked down to see Gudrin on her knees, her face in her hands. The axe was buried in the mighty oak's trunk so deeply that only the handle protruded. Amber light gleamed out of the crescent-shaped cut like the mouth of a jack-O'-lantern.

“How will we ever get the axe free?” asked Brand in wonderment.

Modi appeared at his side. “I will remove it,” he said, taking a step toward the tree.

At this, Gudrin came alive again. “No, Modi! Don't touch the axe!”

Modi's hand stopped, but it didn't retreat. Brand watched Modi's face and his huge hand, frozen in the middle of reaching for the axe. He knew there was a great struggle there. Clearly, he wanted the axe for his own. In the end Modi retreated. Gudrin stood weakly and took her book from her rucksack.

“Lay your hands on the handle, Brand,” she said.

Brand stepped forward, blinking. How was he supposed to pull the blade out of a foot of hardwood? What would the axe do to him?

“No!” said Modi.

“Silence!” shouted Gudrin with what seemed to be the last of her strength. “You will obey me and you will honor the words of your father.”

Modi backed off and turned away. His shoulders hunched and his head hung low, he glowered at the ground fiercely. No one came near him.

“Brand?”

Brand stepped up. He glanced at Modi once, then at the others. Everyone watched him.

“Remove the axe and place it back in my pack.”

Brand nodded and laid his hand upon the handle.

Chapter Thirty-One

The Axe

Brand felt the power of it course through him. It was as if he held the reins of a massive horse that shivered at his touch. He was reminded of the presence he'd felt when he had confronted the Shining Lady and Oberon.

“Bruka!” Gudrin cried in the language of the Kindred.

In response, the axe worked itself out of the hard flesh of the tree. Brand tugged at it, but it was the axe that did the work. He felt as though he drove a powerful animal, merely guiding it.

It came free in his hand and he felt a greater surge of well-being… of power. The axe made him feel stronger. So strong, that its heavy curved blades were as light at a wand in his hand. Slowly, a wide grin opened his lips and spread over his face.

Gudrin opened her rucksack and offered it to Brand.

Brand froze, just as he had seen Modi do in reaction. He stared at the axe, and the amber jewel in the blade shimmered back at him, as if in acknowledgement, or perhaps as a form of greeting.

Gudrin shook her rucksack suggestively.

Brand knew what she wanted. But the thought was unthinkable. He couldn't put down the axe, he couldn't let go of this power. She was asking too much. She wanted a thief to give back the master's purse. She wanted a prisoner to slam the dungeon door closed. She wanted a starving beggar to give up a leg of roasted ham.

He thought of the Shining Lady and of Corbin's Dead brother Sam and of Telyn. Beautiful Telyn.

He stuffed the axe into the open maw of the rucksack. The beautiful Jewel vanished into darkness again.

Everyone relaxed.

“It is done,” said Gudrin.

She sagged down to one knee, and then collapsed.

Chapter Thirty-Two

The Beginning

The battle was over, but they all knew that the war was just beginning. Suddenly tired and calm, Brand and the others picked themselves up and did what they could to staunch the flames. But Froghollow would be a ruin by morning, none of them doubted that.

In the flickering light of the burning house Brand had loved so much, Gudrin came to him and spoke with unusual gentleness. “You are a strong one. Strong of spirit as well as of limb. Few can willingly release Ambros once they have taken it up, and fewer still can do so without getting blood on its curved blades.”

Brand nodded. He knew it was true, he had held Ambros and knew the power of it.

“The enemy has been driven off for now. But life will not be easy for the River Folk from this day forward.”

“We will have to make weapons and prepare for war,” he said grimly.

“Perhaps,” said Gudrin. “What is certain is that your people and mine have a great problem, Brand,” said Gudrin. “I'm asking for your help in solving it.”

Brand looked at her seriously. Her face was old and craggy and worn. Females of the Kindred are rarely attractive, but Gudrin was perhaps even less so than the average. But still, he saw in her a certain beauty, a certain inner strength. She had done everything she could for him and his people by taking Myrrdin's place.

“I'm grateful for all you've done,” Brand said. “I'll help you in any way I can.”

She nodded. “I knew that you would.”